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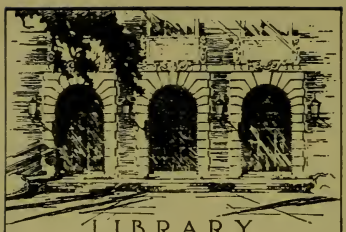
MY SISTER THE ACTRESS

FLORENCE MARRYAT



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MY SISTER THE ACTRESS.

A Novel.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT

(MRS. FRANCIS LEAN),

AUTHOR OF 'LOVE'S CONFLICT,' ETC., ETC.

'Honour and shame from no condition rise:
Act well your part: there all the honour lies.'

POPE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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MY SISTER THE ACTRESS.

CHAPTER I.

'I PROMISE.'

The visit to Baron's Court commences auspiciously. The day is bright and clear: the ice is reported to be in good condition, and Lady Frere has no fault to find with the young ladies' dresses. The morning is spent in making rather a formal inspection of the picture gallery and library. Sir Willoughby and his mother insist upon conducting their guests round the Court themselves; and as the old lady's gait is slow, and the speech of

her son is discursive, the young people are called upon to halt at every second step, whilst she recovers her breath, or he stammers forth a long-winded account of the particular book, picture, or statue under contemplation.

This ordeal lasts until luncheon-time, when Sir Willoughby hands Mrs. Matthews solemnly into the dining-room, and the girls follow, delighted to think that their penance is over. But stiffness prevails even at the meals of Baron's Court. Every dish they partake of seems to be unnaturally cold ; the beer and wine are frozen : the fruit sets one's teeth on edge ; and everybody is relieved when Sir Willoughby's lengthy grace after meat is concluded, and Lady Frere suggests that Robert might take the young ladies for a turn round the grounds or on the ice.

'I wish I could go with you, my dear,' she says, as she places a detaining hand upon

Betha's slender shoulder—it is wonderful, even to herself, the fancy she has taken for this girl; 'but the cold of a winter's afternoon is too much for me. Pray wrap up well, and do not stay out too long. An hour at the most will be sufficient. And mind you take care of Miss Durant, Robert; and see that none of the young ladies take cold.'

'I call that *pointed!*' exclaims Ada, as soon as they are out of hearing. '*Mind you take care of Miss Durant, Robert!* Lady Frere evidently cares little what may become of my sister or of me!'

'Pray do not so misinterpret my grandmother's words, Miss Matthews,' says Bobby. 'I am sure she intended her caution to apply to you all!'

But he does not think so, and his face is glowing with pleasure at the favourable impression which Betha has evidently made upon his relations.

'And how do you like the Court?' he asks her earnestly, when Ada has become tired of teasing him. 'Is it better or worse than you anticipated?'

'Oh, it is beautiful—grand—glorious!' replies Betha; 'better than anything I had dreamed of! But then I never thought much about it, you know,' she adds, ingenuously; 'only it is the finest old place I have ever seen, and looks more like a palace to me than the residence of a private gentleman!'

'I am so *glad* you like it,' says Bobby, fervently. 'I think it *is* rather nice myself; but then, you see, I was born and brought up here; and some day it will be my own, so I cannot help feeling a great interest in it.'

'It must be lovely to have such a place for one's very own,' replies Betha, not dreaming that Bobby will take her words for more than they mean.

'Now, what are you two "mooning" about?' cries Ada, running back to them with a long spray of flowering myrtle in her hand. 'Betha, there are the most magnificent hothouses there you ever saw, and full of *such* flowers and grapes! Do be brisk and enjoy yourself a bit. I'm sure we've been cooped up long enough for one day—no offence to *you*, Mr. Frere—and might make a better use of our liberty now we have it.'

No need to tell them to make full use of it after that. Once away from Baron's Court and out of the shadow of its towering old buttresses, these young people seem determined to enjoy themselves to the utmost. They run—they laugh—they jump together—all down the garden-paths and through the long line of forcing-houses. They are alone, remember: there are no spectators to frown down their merriment, and the eldest of them numbers but two-and-twenty summers.

The grim old gardeners, who have dug and delved at Baron's Court for the last twenty years, prick up their dull ears at the sound of the girlish laughter, and look after the springing forms with visible pleasure.

'It were better if we saw more of such visitors to the Court,' remarks one to another, as Betha thanks him with her sweet smile and sweeter eyes for rendering her some trifling assistance.

'Master Robert, he seem very sweet on all three of 'em,' replies his companion; and indeed, Robert has for once come out of his shell of shyness, and appears as joyous and light-hearted as a boy of ten.

Still in the same mad spirits, having made the tour of the gardens, the young people rush upon the ice, where Ada declares they have a splendid opportunity of taking a lesson in the art of cutting a spread eagle—an accomplishment in which Bobby believes

that he excels. They have the frozen lake all to themselves : Sir Willoughby and Lady Frere would as soon think of sitting down to dinner with their grocer, as allowing the public to enter their grounds ; therefore their ice is sacred to their visitors. It is a large lake for an artificial one, and the young people feel as if they were in an empty ball-room, and skim over it like swallows, without fear of collision, chasing each other from end to end, and proceeding without the slightest caution.

Bobby is in the very centre of the ice executing his spread eagle to the admiration of Ada, who has twice fallen on her back in her attempts to emulate him ; and Ella, who is the worst skater of the four, is engaged in a hopeless pursuit after Betha, who keeps on crossing her wake in the most provoking manner and darting off again with a merry peal of laughter, just as Ella thinks she has her hand upon her. At last they 'cannon'

against each other on the most open part of the lake, where the ice has been longest exposed to the winter sun. Betha ducks her head, and with a graceful curve of her body, is about once more to elude her pursuer, when Ella comes in her clumsy fashion, full tilt against her, and fairly knocks her over. As the girls go down together, they laugh, but the next moment a report like a pistol sounds upon the air, there is a plunge and a rush of water, and a loud scream from Ella draws the attention of Robert and Ada to the occurrence.

'What is the matter, Ella? Have you hurt yourself?'

'No, no! but Betha! Betha has gone in. Betha is under the ice,' cries Ella, as she points to the huge hole where our heroine has disappeared.

'Keep back! keep back!' exclaims Bobby authoritatively, as he pushes the two girls towards the bank, 'or we shall all be in to-

gether!' and then without another word he strips off his jacket, and breaking the damaged ice all round with his feet, plunges in after the drowning girl.

Fortunately she rises at the same spot, and Bobby, seizing hold of her arm, keeps her up somehow in the freezing water until they are both in safety. Twice the rotten ice gives way under them, and Ada and Ella scream in concert as they get another ducking, but the gallant young fellow manages it at last, and they are both safely landed on the bank. Betha is not insensible during the transaction, nor even much frightened. She keeps on saying:

'Oh, Mr. Frere! do leave me! Do think of yourself. What is the good of *both* of us being drowned?'

But Bobby holds on fast till her arm is pinched black and blue, and her hair is nearly torn out by the roots, and they are safe on *terra firma*. And then Betha, wet through,

and cold as ice, without a hat on her head, and her hair streaming down her back, can hardly help laughing at the comical expression of terror depicted on the faces of her friends.

'It's all right, Ada!' she says. 'I'm not dead yet, you see—but—I'm—very—very cold!' she ejaculates with chattering teeth.

'You mustn't sit here; you must come home at once and let grandmamma see after you—or you may be ill!' exclaims Bobby with genuine concern.

'Oh, Mr. Frere! how can I thank you! It was you that did it. I am trying to laugh it off; but if it had not been for you, I should certainly have been drowned. It was so cold and so dark!' she reiterates with a shudder.

'Nonsense, Miss Durant!—it was nothing—nothing. Anybody could have pulled you out,' replies Bobby; 'only we had better get back to the Court as fast as we can, and change our clothes!'

She staggers to her feet, but the shock has been greater than she will allow, and it is with difficulty she can drag her trembling limbs to the house. As soon as she reaches it, however, she receives all possible sympathy.

Lady Frere has a confidential maid called Withers, who has been in her service for half-a-century, and Mrs. Withers is only too delighted to be entrusted with the charge of the drowned young gentleman and lady, and ordered to see that every precaution is taken against the effects of their accident.

Betha and Bobby fight strenuously against the idea of being put to bed; but to bed they are put all the same, whether they like it or not, and well dosed with feather-quilts, warming-pans, spiced wines, and other remedies against the misadventure they have gone through.

Lady Frere, indeed, will not hear of Betha leaving the Court that day, but persuades

Mrs. Matthews to let the girl remain her guest until the morrow, on the plea that it would be highly dangerous for her to quit her bed again now that she is thoroughly warm and comfortable. And Betha has no particular wish to dispute the point. The spiced wine is a very soothing and sleep-inducing medicine, and she lies under her feather-quilt tranquilly watching the flames of the wood fire flickering on the wall, and thanking God in a languid drowsy way that she has been preserved from a horrible death. And meanwhile Mrs. Withers, in her old-fashioned starched net cap and snowy apron, sits beside the bed and entertains her with an account of all the fatal accidents she has ever heard of; and points out how thankful she ought to be, to be lying in her bed instead of her coffin.

'Yes, I suppose I might have been drowned, if Mr. Frere hadn't been there,' says Betha, sleepily. 'It all happened so

quickly, that I can hardly remember anything, but I know I bumped my head against the ice the first time I came up.'

'Oh, my dear young lady, it is a providence—a real providence!' exclaims Mrs. Withers, solemnly. 'And Mr. Robert, too—such a brave, good young man! If he had been cut off, his papa and his grandma would never have held up their heads again. Why, he's their all, miss! positively their all.'

'Yes; I never thought before of his running the risk with me. It would have been terrible if anything had happened to him—and when he is going to have this beautiful place for his own, too. He had much better have let me drown by myself.'

'Oh, don't say that, miss! Mr. Robert has been brought up to do his duty, and he would never shirk it, not even if death stood in the way. But I can't bear to think what might have been the consequence if things had happened otherwise.'

'It was very good of him—it was very, *very* good of him,' murmurs Betha drowsily, as she closes her eyes to hide the tears that come into them, as she recalls the sad expression of Bobby's face in Mrs. Chapman's drawing-room, when she told him that she could not love him.

'Many people would have let me drown after that,' she thinks childishly, 'and been glad, perhaps, to see me drown, like Danny Mann did the Colleen Bawn. It was very kind of Mr. Frere to risk his own life to save mine—much kinder than I have deserved of him.'

By which it will be seen that Elizabeth Durant's ideas of love are founded on her knowledge of that passion, as exhibited by the heroes and villains of dramatic art, rather than by any individual experience gained from this matter-of-fact existence.

Lady Frere visits her young guest more than once during the evening, and Betha

inquires eagerly after the welfare of her preserver.

'He is as well as yourself, my dear. He has been sensible enough to take the advice of an old woman and remain in bed, and so I hope to see you both down to breakfast to-morrow morning. Robert is an excellent lad —dutiful, respectful, and obedient. He has never caused his father, nor myself, a heart-ache in his life. He is a good son, and will make a good husband.'

Still praises of Mr. Frere! Betha goes to sleep that night with them ringing in her ears, and descends to breakfast the next morning glowing with gratitude to, and admiration of, this lanky, high-shouldered hero with the long nose and the short-sighted eyes.

'Am I not gorgeous!' she exclaims, as she comes dancing towards him in the clear cold sunshine of the winter's morning. 'Look at my dress! You may fancy a ducking would not improve it, Mr. Frere; and more than

once, yesterday, I contemplated with horror what I should look like when I put it on again; but Lady Frere is so good—she set Mrs. Withers to work last night to dry and iron it, and retrim it with this beautiful silk, so that I have come out "better than new!" Was it not kind of her?'

'Grandmamma is always kind in her way,' replies Bobby; 'but I never saw her fuss about anybody yet as she does about you. She has taken a very great fancy to you, Betha.'

'I am *so* glad,' replies the girl, not noticing the familiarity of his address; 'for she is such a charming old lady, and I think, when really good people take a liking for me, that I can't be all bad myself.'

'*All bad?*' echoes Bobby. 'All good, you mean, from head to foot. How thankful I am that yesterday's accident has had no worse results for either of us.'

'Oh! Mr. Frere, I have not thanked you yet—I have not told you——'

'Please don't, then! If there is an obligation on either side, it lies on mine. But here are the pater and mater; so now we shall get something to eat.'

Sir Willoughby is earnest in his congratulations on Betha's restored looks, and his mother, greatly to the astonishment of all present, kisses the girl upon her forehead.

'Welcome, my dear,' she says with stately courtesy, 'to Baron's Court; and I hope it will not be the last time you will be our guest here. I must let you return to Black Abbotts this afternoon, as I promised Mrs. Matthews you should be ready when she sent the carriage; but if you approve of the plan, I shall ask her permission to have you for a few days to myself next week. Will you come?'

'If—if—I am able,' stammers Betha, with reddening cheeks.

'You mean, if your friends consent! Of course you must ask your papa's leave first;

but I think, when he hears my name, that he will give it. The Freres have always been on good terms with the Durants.'

And then they sit down to breakfast, and under the diversion caused by the meal, Betha's confusion has time to subside. But she cannot forget it. Lady Frere's invitation has made her remember that she is visiting at Baron's Court under false pretences, and she cannot be happy until she has relieved her mind upon the subject.

'Mr. Frere,' she whispers, as they rise from table; 'are you busy this morning? Can you take me for a walk in the garden?'

Bobby's face glows with pleasure at the invitation.

'Busy! Certainly not! I wish I were; for that would intimate I was of some use in the world—not that I would miss the pleasure of taking you into the garden, Betha, for anything,' he says in his bashful, awkward manner. And then this well-brought-up

young man raises his voice, and continues: 'Grandmamma, Miss Durant and I would like to take a turn in the garden.'

'Very well, my dear Robert, why not?' replies Lady Frere—'only no more skating, remember. I cannot have this dear young lady's life risked a second time.'

'Oh no, you may trust us for that,' says Bobby. I don't think either Miss Durant or myself would care to have another ducking.'

'That's a sweet girl, Willoughby,' remarks the old lady to her son as they stand at the window together and watch Betha and Bobby walking demurely down the terraced walk; 'handsome, ladylike, accomplished, modest, and of a good family. I don't think our Robert could do better if he searched the whole world round.'

'Does our Robert think of doing anything at all?' demands Sir Willoughby, solemnly.

'I cannot say, my dear son; but I should

think anybody could see that he is much taken by her. And it would be a good thing to see him settled, Willoughby, young as he is. Young men are so wild nowadays, and the world is full of temptations. It would be a good thing if Robert were settled down with a sweet young woman like Miss Durant for his wife. It would keep him quietly at Baron's Court with us, instead of running about that dreadful London all by himself.'

'Do as you like, my dear mother, do as you like,' replies Sir Willoughby, speaking as unconcernedly of his son's settlement in life, as if he had been a carriage-horse that Lady Frere wished to part with or exchange.

The young people continue to walk demurely—that is, some paces apart from one another—down the path that leads to the garden; but as soon as they are out of sight of the Court, Betha addresses her companion hurriedly.

'Mr. Frere, I must speak to you. I feel so very uncomfortable about something. You heard what your grandmamma said just now about my writing for my father's leave to stay at Baron's Court. She is evidently unaware that I am not on speaking terms with my father, that he turned me out of his house, and I could not visit here on such conditions.'

Bobby looks thoughtful, and pulls his budding moustache, making himself uglier than usual under the operation.

'No, I don't suppose she does know it; *I* never told her, at least, although I heard all about it at Mrs. Chapman's—and I thought it a horrid shame, Betha, and I think so still. But what difference can it make to grandmamma's asking you here? She would think all the more of you if she knew the circumstances under which you left Major Durant's house, and how you loved your own mother. It is an honour and a credit to you,

Betha, and every right-minded person would say the same thing.'

'Ah! if loving my dear mother were the passport for my respectability I should be fit to dine with the Queen to-morrow,' cries Betha, her bright eyes dimmed with tears of recollection, 'for I *did* love her, Mr. Frere, oh, so dearly! Sometimes I can hardly realise, even now, that she is lying in the cemetery at Kensal Green, with a great horrid heavy stone pressing down upon her dear breast. And what is worse than all, do you know that my father is actually married again—married to that Mrs. Wallerton, and before my dear mother had been dead for six months! Mr. Frere, if they were to offer me all the riches of India, I could not go back and live in that house now——'

'Who could expect it of you?' exclaims Bobby, indignantly; 'but, Betha, all this has nothing to do with grandmamma's fancy for you. She likes you for yourself alone, and

would be the first to blame your father's conduct if she knew of it.'

'Yes, yes, Mr. Frere—but then—it is what has come since, you see.'

'*Don't* call me "Mr. Frere,"' he says pleadingly. 'Can't you hear me calling you "Betha," and yet you are not angry with me. Won't you take the hint?'

'But I don't know what to call you,' replies Betha, timidly.

'And I'm sure I don't know what to tell you,' says the young fellow, ruefully. 'At home they call me "Robert," but that is such a hideous name, and "Bobby" sounds like a baby——'

'I don't think "Robert" is hideous,' replies Betha, 'but I like "Rob" better.'

'Then call me "Rob." *Do*, Betha!' he says eagerly.

'I don't know. I must think about it; it sounds so familiar. Only I will use it for once, Mr. Frere, and say, "Thank you, Rob,

a thousand times for what you did for me yesterday." I lay awake half the night thinking of it, and realising what in my selfishness I could not see at first, that you risked your life to save mine.'

'It was nothing, indeed; *indeed* it was nothing,' says Bobby in the utmost confusion, as for a little while he holds the hand she has placed in his own.

'But it was *everything*, Rob. It was risking the loss not only of your life, but of the happiness of your father and grandmother—the loss of this beautiful place, too, and all the riches you are heir to,' replies Betha, as she glances round upon the fair domain, laid out in park and pasture-land and pleasure-gardens, that surrounds them.

'And you do not believe that they would all be nothing to me—positively *nothing*—without *you*,' says Bobby; 'that the loss of the fortune and the Court, and of my father and grandmother into the bargain, would seem

trifles beside the awful loss of you. Betha, if you had been drowned yesterday, I would have drowned myself with you. In saving your life I was only trying to save my own.'

'Oh, Mr. Frere, I thought you were never going to talk to me like that again!' exclaims Betha, as she drags her hand away, and reddens like a peony.

'How can I help it when you speak to me so kindly? I told you in London what I felt for you. Do you imagine those feelings have altered since? Why, I have been miserable ever since I lost sight of you, and now that I have met you again, I love you ten thousand times better than before.'

'Mr. Frere, how very, very wrong of you! Indeed you must forget all about me. If you knew—knew—everything, you would never speak to me like that.'

'Why not? What is there that I do not know? I have been told one thing, Betha,

by Mrs. Chapman, that you are compelled to earn your own living as a teacher or companion; and I suppose that is what you are ashamed of. But *I* am not ashamed of it. I think it is noble of you, and I want to save you from the drudgery of such a life by making you my wife. You said "No" once, but you won't say it again, Betha, will you? You will consent to share Baron's Court, and the riches, and the other things you seem to think I care so much for, with me, and make them of tenfold value in my eyes?'

Betha does not know what to answer. Confused visions of being saved from drowning, and her homeless, friendless condition, mixed up with her stage experiences, and the deep devotion shining from Bobby's soft brown eyes, render her almost incapable of replying.

She feels as if she belonged to this heroic, generous youth who has saved her life and wishes to share all his possessions with her;

and the obstacle that stands in the way is not her own want of love for him, but the awful secret of the profession she has adopted. Yet, with all her gratitude and desire to reward the service he has rendered her, Betha cannot help feeling a certain relief to remember that as soon as he hears she is an actress all question of marriage between them will be at an end.

'Mr. Frere!' she says hurriedly, after a short pause, 'pray stop a minute and let me speak to you! You would not have said what you have, if you had known all. Aunt Janie did not tell you the truth. I am not a teacher nor a companion. I *could* not be! The life would kill me. *I am an actress!*'

'*What?*' ejaculates Bobby Frere, with unmistakable horror.

She could hardly have startled the young man more if she had told him she was a murderess. He has only seen the stage and the players on it from below the footlights,

and has enjoyed his dissipation, perhaps, all the more from the belief that there is a vast amount of wickedness behind them. He has been brought up with the conventional notion regarding the immorality of the theatre and everything connected with it, and has no idea that the private lives of many professional performers are much purer than those led by the votaries of fashion, lolling on their silken sofas and playing at being vicious for the mere sake of killing time.

'Yes,' replies Betha, very red but very firm, 'I am an actress. I am engaged now at the Royal Theatre at Buton; and you might have seen my name any day on the bills as Elizabeth Selwyn. I am not playing just now, because the pantomime is on, but I may be recalled to work any day. I am living in Buton with another actress, Miss Montalambert, and I get a pound a week for my salary,' continues Betha, determined to do the thing well whilst she is about it.

'And so you see, Mr. Frere, you mustn't talk to me again as you did just now, or Lady Frere will be very sorry she ever invited me to Baron's Court.'

But the young man is not in a condition to consider the feelings of his grandmother.

'An actress on the stage!' he exclaims; 'what an awful desecration! What was Mrs. Chapman about to let you do such a thing, Betha? Could Major Durant have known of your intention? Surely between them they might have found some more respectable occupation for you!'

'Please don't speak of the theatrical profession like that!' says Betha, proudly. 'It is much more than a respectable occupation—it is noble, grand, intellectual, and elevating; and I feel honoured to be one of its members. Only you do not think so, perhaps—and I am sure that Sir Willoughby and Lady Frere will not—and therefore I am sorry that Mrs.

Matthews did not tell them I was an actress before I came to Baron's Court.'

'Does Mrs. Matthews know it, then?' demands Bobby, with surprise.

'Of *course* Mrs. Matthews knows it. I told Ada the first time we met. Why do you ask me such a question, Mr. Frere? Do you think that if she *had* known it, she would not let me associate with Ada and Ella?'

'No, no! I thought nothing—I knew nothing! Your news has taken away my breath, so that I hardly know what I am saying. But you will leave it, dearest Betha, will you not? You will promise me to leave the stage and become my wife?'

'But how could I be your wife? Your grandmamma would never give her consent to such a thing.'

'I shall not ask my grandmamma! Do you suppose I am going to be tied to her apron-string all my life? I have had quite

enough of that already, thank you. I love you, Betha; and I shall ask no one's consent but yours. Will you marry me?'

'And live down here?'

'Well, yes! I suppose so. At least——'

'That would be very pleasant, wouldn't it? particularly if your father and grandmother were both angry with us,' says Betha, with a merry laugh.

The laugh grates instinctively upon his ear. No girl who loved him would laugh at such a moment.

'Well, somewhere else, then!' he answers, pettishly; and then becoming serious adds: 'You see, the fact is I am dependent on my father until my grandmother's death; and he has been foolish enough not to bring me up to any profession, but I am sure it will be all right if he sees that we want to marry each other. He will make me an allowance, and then we can live where we like, and consult no one's wishes but our own.'

'I wouldn't live on charity!' says Betha, shaking her head.

'Do you call an allowance from my father charity?'

'Yes, it would be just the same thing. We should become dependent on his pleasure. No, Mr. Frere! I *can* work for myself, and I mean to do so till my life's end. So please don't think anything more of me.'

'I shall think of you till I die!' says Bobby, passionately; 'and I will never give you up. Betha, if my father gives his consent to our marriage, will you marry me?'

'He will never give his consent, Rob! It is very kind of you to wish it—but it cannot be.'

The young man stops suddenly in the pathway and confronts her.

'Betha! look me in the face! If everything goes right, will you engage yourself to marry me?'

'If you will let me remain in my profession till you have enough money of your own to support me on.'

'I will let you do anything you like. I will work my own fingers to the bone till I have made enough money to take you off the stage and give you a lovely little house all of your own. And then will you marry me, Betha?—then will you marry me?'

His earnestness overcomes all the girl's scruples, and her eyes fill with grateful tears.

'Oh, Rob! you are very, *very* good!' she reiterates; 'and yesterday you saved my life. Yes, indeed I *will* marry you, when that time comes, and if you still love me then as you do now.'

'*Promise* me, dear!'

'I promise!' answers Betha, solemnly; and then Bobby lifts his hat from his head, and stooping down, their young lips meet in a fresh and innocent kiss.

CHAPTER II.

'IT WILL BE AS I CHOOSE.'

WERE Betha less inexperienced in the affairs of love, that kiss would rouse her suspicions. It is cheerful and quiet, as the kiss a sister bestows upon a favourite brother; it awakens no new troublous feelings in her breast of an unknown future dawning upon her; it is the kiss of gratitude, and has not the faintest essence of passion in its flavour. But Betha in such matters is a child—as unsophisticated as a girl of twelve; and in her eyes the kiss is all right—just the sort of pledge that a young man who has asked her to marry him would require at her hands, but not so nice

to her own taste as a hearty embrace from Kate Montalambert or Ada Matthews. The kiss throws Bobby off his mental equilibrium : it leaves Betha as collected as if she had been kissing a puppy dog.

'I am afraid your grandmamma will be very angry,' she says, as soon as he releases her.

'I am sure she will be no such thing; or if she should feel a little startled at first, I will soon make everything square between us. Leave me to tell her after you are gone, Betha; and to-morrow morning you will see me posting over to Black Abbotts with a letter of congratulation in my hand.'

'Lady Frere will want me to give up the stage,' says Betha.

'And you *will*, will you not?' demands the lover, eagerly.

The girl shakes her head.

'I don't think I can, Rob, not until I have done something to make myself remembered. Perhaps you don't know what a

strong feeling ambition is! I yearn to be famous. If I had gone on living my quiet life at home with my dear mother, I might not have felt that yearning, but I have tasted the taste of it, and I shall never rest now until I have done something worth doing.'

'I will never thwart you in any of your inclinations,' replies Bobby, fervently; 'only Betha, when you are my wife, you will promise to live at home quietly with me.'

'Yes! when I *am* your wife,' replies the girl, sedately.

As she is about to step into the Matthews' carriage that afternoon to return to Black Abbotts, Betha receives Lady Frere's farewell embrace with a degree of compunction. She foresees all the objections her ladyship will raise against her, as soon as ever she hears of her profession, and feels as if she had no right to allow herself to be kissed under false pretences.

Bobby is most anxious to accompany her to Black Abbotts in the carriage; but his laudable intention, to Betha's great relief, is happily overruled by his grandmother, who requires his attendance in another direction.

So the girl is permitted to return alone, whilst she ponders, neither with pleasure nor pain, on the marvellous fact that she has pledged herself at some day—indistinct, hazy, and far off in the indistinguishable future — to become the wife of Robert Frere.

The Matthew girls receive her back with noisy demonstrations of delight, whilst their mother expresses a formal hope that she is properly grateful for Lady Frere's exceeding goodness in helping to avert the consequences of an accident that was due to sheer carelessness.

'I never did approve of young ladies skating,' she says, primly, 'and I never shall. In my opinion it is a very unfeminine exercise;

and after the misadventure of yesterday, it will not be with my consent that Ada and Ella ever again venture on the ice.'

'Oh! what a wretch you were to tumble in,' cries Ada, as she bears Betha away. 'Now we shall have a nice business to get mamma's leave to use our skates again.'

'What a wretch Ella was to tumble on the top of me, you mean,' replies Betha, smiling. 'I should never have gone in by myself; and I am sure I regret it as much as you can do,' she adds, with a little sigh, remembering the event which followed her rescue.

She consoles herself, however, with the idea that Sir Willoughby and Lady Frere will certainly refuse their consent to Rob's proposal, and then there will be an end to the matter, and no one much the worse that it has taken place.

In the morning, however, soon after breakfast, she is startled by the announcement that Lady Frere has already driven over from

Baron's Court, and is closeted with Mrs. Matthews in that lady's private room.

Betha flies at once to her bedroom and locks herself in. She quite expected to see Bobby Frere arrive with a long face to announce the failure of all his hopes; but what can this sudden irruption on the part of his grandmother portend? Why should the old lady take the trouble to drive over at eleven o'clock in the morning to tell Mrs. Matthews that Bobby has made a fool of himself? 'It cannot be,' thinks Betha, with a wildly throbbing heart that should warn her of the dangerous step she is taking—'it cannot possibly be that Lady Frere approves of her grandson's intentions, and has come to confirm them.'

As the thought flashes through her mind, the girl turns pale, and feels as though she were surrounded by a net of which Sir Willoughby and Lady Frere held the string. She listens with bated breath to each step

that mounts the stairs, fearing lest it should be that of a messenger sent to summon her to the presence of her friends. But an hour, which appears like twelve to the waiting girl, passes away; and to her relief she hears the rumble of wheels upon the gravelled drive, and watches Lady Frere whilst she is handed into the carriage by her footman, and driven rapidly towards Baron's Court again.

After all, thinks Betha, feeling as though a load had been suddenly lifted from her bosom, perhaps Mr. Frere has had no opportunity to broach the subject to his grandmother, and she only visited Black Abbotts upon business of her own.

She is gleefully re-arranging her dress and hair before going down stairs again, when a tap sounds upon her door, and a servant informs her that her mistress requests her presence in her private room.

Once more all Betha's fears are aroused, and determined to learn the worst, she runs

down quickly and finds herself in the presence of Mrs. Matthews and her daughters. The aspect of affairs is not promising.

Ella stands at one of the windows, with tears trickling down her face, which she wipes furtively away: Ada looks sheepish and uneasy: and their mother occupies the hearthrug, with the air of an inquisitor.

Betha perceives at once that she is had up for judgment, and braces her nerves accordingly.

'Will you oblige me, Miss Durant, by taking a chair?' commences Mrs. Matthews stiffly. 'I have something of importance to say to you.'

'Thank you, Mrs. Matthews, but I prefer to stand,' replies Betha, in the same tone of voice.

'Lady Frere has been here this morning to speak to me on an unpleasant subject—a most unpleasant subject,' continues her hostess.

'I know all about it, madam,' says the girl. 'It was to tell you that Mr. Frere proposed to me yesterday, and that I accepted him—that is, conditionally on his friends' approval; but I really don't care whether I marry him or not, and it is quite a matter of indifference to me what Lady Frere thinks upon the subject.'

But this is not the intelligence that Mrs. Matthews was about to communicate to Betha, and the news takes her completely by surprise. She has long looked upon young Frere as a very suitable match for one of her own daughters, and experienced more than one pang yesterday, at being compelled to leave so powerful an attraction as her pretty guest at Baron's Court without the counter-balancing influence of either Ada or Ella. And to hear that the opportunity was taken advantage of in so mean a manner fills her maternal breast with gall and wormwood.

'Proposed to *you!*' she says rudely; 'I don't believe it!'

'You don't believe it!' echoes Betha; 'and what cause have I given you to doubt my word?'

'The very best of causes, Miss Durant—that you have come under my roof and accepted my hospitality as an impostor. The painful intelligence that Lady Frere considered it her duty to speak to me this morning is—that you are a common actress.'

The term rouses Betha's ire. She confronts her accuser with an erect figure and a flashing eye.

'It is untrue! I am an actress, but I am not common, any more than Ada or Ella, or yourself. And whatever I may be, I used no deception in the matter, madam! You knew of my profession before you ever invited me to Black Abbotts.'

'I did no such thing,' returns Mrs. Matthews shrilly. 'Do you suppose it

possible that, had I done so, I would have asked you to stay under the same roof with my daughters—my pure innocent girls, who have never seen the inside of such a polluted place as a theatre—that *I* would have allowed *you*, reeking of the stage and all its foul accessories, to kneel down in prayer with us morning and evening—and to mix with the ladies and gentlemen who enter our house, confident that they will meet nothing here that can contaminate them.'

'Ada!' says Betha, turning to her friend, 'do you mean to tell me that you never informed your mother that I am on the stage?'

Ada, who has been winking and making signs at Betha all this time, in the hope of preventing a betrayal of the deception she has practised, finding that her attempts are futile, takes refuge in a cowardly prevarication.

'No, Betha; because I didn't quite understand.'

'You did not understand that I am an actress by profession? It is untrue! I told you so plainly the first time we met, and both you and Ella understood me perfectly.'

'Miss Durant! I cannot allow you to accuse my daughters of falsehood or deception. It may be the practice in the miserable calling to which you belong, but they have been brought up, thank heaven! in a very different manner, and do not even know the names of the vices with which you must unhappily be familiar.'

'I am not aware what I have done to deserve this insult at your hands, Mrs. Matthews!'

'You have intruded your company upon me and my friends, knowing that had we been aware of your profession, you would never have been admitted within these doors. How I shall make my peace with dear Lady Frere I hardly know. She was too much

shocked and wounded to be able to listen to reason, and I could scarcely persuade her that I am as blameless in the matter as herself.'

'Nevertheless, "dear Lady Frere's" grandson is most anxious to make me his wife—notwithstanding my calling and all his grandmother's wounded feelings,' says Betha, sarcastically.

'It can never be—it is impossible—it would be an outrage on society,' cries Mrs. Matthews.

'It will be *as I choose*,' says Betha, proudly, 'and as Mr. Frere chooses, and we shall not ask the opinion of his grandmother or society on the subject. Yesterday I said *Yes!* to-day I say *No.* Since Lady Frere has chosen to insult me through you, Mrs. Matthews, you may tell her in return that if I do not live to take her place, it will be only because I consider myself too good for it. I am a gentleman's daughter—nothing

can undo that. I have been reared and educated like a gentlewoman, and have all a gentlewoman's tastes and inclinations, and if I have chosen a profession that numbers some amongst its numbers that are not all they should be, I have done no more than if I had become a countess, under the idea that all the aristocracy are virtuous. I shall leave your house within the hour; but if both our lives are spared you shall live to blush for the day when you turned me with insult from your doors.'

'I could not knowingly sleep under the same roof with an actress,' replies the virtuous Mrs. Matthews; 'there is no knowing now how far the evil may have spread, nor what contamination you may not have communicated to my poor innocent girls.'

'I have not taught them to tell falsehoods,' replies Betha, as she leaves the room.

Ada slinks after her, and attempts to excuse her own conduct.

'Please don't add to my poor opinion of you,' replies Betha coldly. 'If you did not positively affirm that you had told your mother of my profession, you insinuated as much, and that is quite as bad. It is to your duplicity and Ella's that I owe the affront that has been offered me. I am glad to be going back to friends, who, whatever their calling may be, are at least true and honest in their dealings with me.'

So she packs up her box, poor child, and quits the house where she has been made so much of, cast out again upon the world—a pariah—because her profession and her virtue are, in the eyes of some people, irreconcilable! She reaches Buton about four o'clock, and is received with open arms by Kate Montalambert.

'My dear child! how fortunate I am at home. Such work as I have had during your absence you never saw. Those troublesome fellows found out I was alone, dear, you

know, and they regularly besieged the house. I have had to run away to get rid of them, and take my tea with Miss Chesney over the way. But this afternoon I had determined to remain at home. It must have been instinct! And I have shrimps too—such fine ones! I could not resist buying them! And how glad I am to see you again. But you're not looking quite the thing, Betha! Well! I don't wonder at it. Fancy being a whole month away from the theatre! I should be dead in half the time. And you're not back a day too soon, either. I expect uncle would have sent a telegram to-morrow. The pantomime is on its last legs, dear! Time, too, you know. It will have run the nine weeks on Saturday, and Miss Coralie Cuthbert opens with "Romeo and Juliet" the week after next. Uncle wants you for the first piece, Betha. You and I are to play in "Naval Engage-

ments" together. Yours is a pretty part, and plenty of action. I'm sure you'll like it.'

'What I like best is to be with you again, Kate,' replies Betha, as she nestles in her friend's arms; 'I wish I had never gone away—I haven't enjoyed myself much. The theatre is the only place that seems to me like home now.'

'And the more you see of it, the more you'll love it, my dear,' says Miss Montalambert, heartily. 'You never met an actress yet that cared for moping in a house. When once you've joined in the work and shared the applause, you can't get the taste out of your mouth again. It's meat and drink to you—and when it fails you, you die! At least, I know I shall!—but what is this, child? You're not crying, surely!'

'Only a little,' pleads Betha; 'I am tired and—and—disappointed, and rather worried.

Don't talk about it, Kate! It is over now. Let us have our tea and shrimps and go down to the theatre and forget all our troubles! I shall be quite pleased to see the dear old pantomime again. I was so sorry to hear that Mr. Rodney had hurt his leg in the trap! And how is Cissy Holles getting through the measles? She must have been a loss to you, for I think she was the prettiest girl in the ballet?'

'Oh! she is all right again, and coming back to us next week. Rodney's leg is likely to be a much longer business! Yes; Cissy *has* a nice face, but very thick ankles, my dear. It was always a marvel to me how uncle could put her in the front row.'

And so Mrs. Potter rambles on, of parts, pieces, and persons, and Betha is discreet enough to tell her nothing of the little episode which she has just passed through. But it rankles in her innocent breast through the

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ensuing night, and makes her pure heart ache, and gives her the first experience of a desire for revenge which has ever entered into her girlish life.

CHAPTER III.

'YOU'LL NEVER MARRY HIM!'

Bobby Frere does not give her time to get the better of this feeling. Having had a stormy interview with his grandmother—an interview during which the old lady hardly recognises the shy, obedient young man whom she has trained so carefully—he mounts his horse and rides furiously first to Black Abbotts and thence to Buton. He calls at the lodgings in Tavistock Gate, when Betha and Kate Montalambert are at the theatre, and without leaving his name, retreats to an hotel, only to make his reappearance at an early hour the following morning. Betha

enters the little sitting-room to find it already occupied by a young man, crimson with excitement and trembling with eagerness; whilst Mrs. Potter, hearing that a gentleman is below waiting to see 'Miss Selwyn,' is discreet enough to remain in her own apartment until the interview is ended.

'You need not tell me your news!' exclaims Betha, as she advances with outstretched hand to greet her cavalier, 'I have heard it already. Lady Frere was closeted with Mrs. Matthews for an hour yesterday, the upshot of which was that I was insulted so grossly that I was obliged to quit the house.'

'But not by my grandmother's desire, Betha, rest assured of that,' replies Bobby, eagerly; 'she was dreadfully angry when I told her of your profession, but she could never forget that she is a lady—either to you or anybody else.'

'I knew nothing about it, but what I heard from Mrs. Matthews,' says Betha, 'but she

said quite enough about "vice," and "contamination," and "defilement," to make me understand that Lady Frere had not spared my calling or myself. But won't you sit down, Mr. Frere? There is no need to tire ourselves by standing.'

'*Why* do you call me "Mr. Frere"?' says Bobby mournfully, as he ventures to touch her hand; 'surely, you will not cast me off, Betha, because my grandmother has not proved as agreeable as she might be?'

'It becomes your duty to cast *me* off,' returns Betha, proudly. Yet she hopes —just for the sake of thwarting Lady Frere and Mrs. Matthews—that he will *not*.

'*Cast you off!* I will never do it to my dying day—not if you were to send me from you now and for ever,' exclaims the young man fervently. 'Oh, Betha! you little know how much I care for you, if you imagine that my feelings and intentions are

to be swayed by the wishes of my grandmother! Let her go to ——'

'Hush,' cries Betha, laughing, 'what *were* you going to say? Please don't take it into your head that because I am an actress I am used to that sort of language. But seriously, Rob, you must think of your own people. You are dependent on them, remember, and it will not do to go against them!'

'I will never give you up,' replies Rob, doggedly; and Betha perceives for the first time that there is a vast amount of determination lying beneath the bashfulness of this young man's outward demeanour. 'If you turned me from your door, Betha, and ordered me never to see you again, I would still live single and alone, for love of you, and keep on hoping that time might alter your feelings and incline you to reward my constancy. Because I love you—do you understand the word? I love *you*, and no other woman shall ever be my wife.'

'Dear Rob!' says the girl, softly. His fervour touches her heart—it is so sweet to the young and lonely to be loved! 'But you mustn't quarrel with your friends for me, dear. Think how unhappy I should be to know that I had made you so.'

'I can never be unhappy whilst you care for me. Betha, you told me yesterday that when I could support you you would leave the stage and be my wife. Will you stick to your promise now?'

'Yes; if you wish me to do so.'

'Then nothing can have the power to make me miserable. My only fear has been lest you should feel the insult that has been offered you too keenly to speak to me again! But if you will promise to wait till I am in a position to marry you, why, then the day may come sooner than either of us think for.'

'Oh, I will promise you *that* gladly,' says the girl. She has been dreading lest he

should ask her to marry him at once; and to wait till he has sufficient money to marry on—which means, in her ideas, to wait until Sir Willoughby and Lady Frere are in their graves—seems to put off the evil day to a time too far off to be worth speculating on. 'I will gladly wait for you,' she repeats; 'and now, Rob, tell me the whole business. I have already heard what Lady Frere thinks of my profession, so you need not fear wounding my feelings.'

'Well, they were awfully put out about it, there is no doubt,' says Bobby, ruefully; 'not because I wanted to marry you, but because you are on the stage, and they ordered me never to see you again. But I reminded them that I am of age, and told them that if you do not become Lady Frere nobody else shall.'

'Bravo, Rob!' cries Betha, clapping her hands.

'And then my father talked a lot of non-

sense about religion and the stage and mésalliances, but I told him that he had no business to throw me in the way of a girl like you without first finding out about your profession and so forth, and that he had no one but himself to thank for the consequences. And I reminded grandmamma of the fuss she made over you, and how she had praised you for your looks and manners and good breeding; but it was all of no use, Betha. The fact of your being an actress has blotted out every good thing that went before it.'

'Is it not unjust?' says Betha.

'It is wicked, infamous, cruel!' exclaims her lover. 'But it can make no difference to me, darling; and if you will consider yourself engaged to be my wife I will be true and faithful to you to our lives' end.'

'Then I *will* be engaged to you,' says Betha, stretching out her hand to meet his; 'and I will try all I can to rise in my profession and make a great name for myself,

and then the day may come when Sir Willoughby and Lady Frere will be proud, instead of ashamed, to see you married to an actress.'

'It will be the proudest day of my life, whatever it may be of theirs,' replies the enamoured Bobby; and then Miss Montalambert is summoned and introduced to Betha's *fiancé,* and the three sit down to breakfast together, and one at least is supremely happy.

But that one is not Betha. She never asks her lover what are his plans or prospects for the future. She is content to know that he considers himself pledged to her, and that Sir Willoughby and Lady Frere and the Matthews' will, in due course, be informed of the fact, and see that her personal influence and attractions have had the power to outweigh all other considerations. It is some relief to Betha's revengeful inclinations to feel that she has succeeded in falsifying the

prophecies of her late hostess, and proving that she did not tell a falsehood in order to glorify herself.

As soon as Bobby Frere has taken his departure she is naturally subjected to a great deal of 'chaff' on the part of the lively Miss Montalambert; but it is much easier to bear than it would have been, had her heart been really concerned in the matter.

'Oh, you sly puss!' cries Miss Kate; 'so this is the work you have been so quietly engaged upon, is it?—catching a rich young man for yourself! Well, he is not handsome, my dear, but he looks the gentleman all over; and I dare say he'll give you lots of nice presents.'

'I wish you wouldn't talk in that way, Kate. I don't want him to give me presents, and he is not likely to do so either; for he has no money of his own.'

'No money, my dear! Nonsense! and

riding that beautiful horse. And did you see his suit and his necktie and his gloves? Men can't dress in that style who have no money.'

'He is quite dependent on his father, nevertheless.'

'Well, he'll screw the money out of him, then; and don't you be a fool, Betha, and say you don't want any presents. Take everything he'll give you. How are you to get up a stock of jewellery else? It is not necessary to marry the man because he buys you a few trinkets. La, child! I've been engaged dozens of times. I'm always engaged when I have the opportunity. It's so convenient: someone to take you out on Sundays and pay your cabs and buy your gloves, and so forth; and if you're engaged to him no one can say it's wrong. I think you're very wise to have engaged yourself to Mr. Frere. It will be a protection for you in the theatre, dear, and keep the men at a distance. But

I don't think you'll marry him, Betha. I have considerable powers of prevision, and I don't think Mr. Frere is the sort of man for you. All very well to be engaged to, and so forth, but you'll never be his wife, my dear; you may take your oath of that!'

'But I have promised never to be the wife of anyone else,' says Betha, seriously.

'Oh, you ridiculous little creature! You look as solemn over it as if it was a matter of life and death. Well, never mind, my dear; we'll wait and see. You say one thing and I say another, but I wish I had a thousand pounds depending on my proving to be right!'

But, from that day — although Bobby makes his appearance about twice a week, to sit for a couple of hours by Betha's side, or to watch her from the wings as she goes through the drudgery of a rehearsal, and a pearl ring appears on the third finger of her left hand as a pledge of the engagement

entered into between them—her new condition does not make much alteration in the girl's life.

As soon as the first sore feelings with regard to the conduct of Lady Frere and Mrs. Matthews have faded from her mind, Betha throws herself with renewed interest into her theatrical studies, and seldom remembers during Bobby's absence that she is engaged to him at all. The great 'star,' Miss Coralie Cuthbert, has arrived from London, and is turning the whole theatre topsy turvy with her airs and graces. Nothing in Buton is good enough for Miss Cuthbert, and she expresses her opinions freely. She is one of those 'stars' who, with real talent, has so large a bump of self-esteem, that praise and adulation, instead of spurring her on to further efforts, turns her brain, until she is odious to herself and others.

She is a large, fair, handsome woman, who

reached her present position, more on account of her beauty than because her genius is exalted above that of others. But it would be difficult to convince Miss Coralie Cuthbert of the fact. She stands on the stage during the hours of rehearsal, clad in satin and sealskin and velvet, ordering about prompter, scene-shifters, carpenters, and dressers, as though they were so many 'properties'—ordering about even the stage-manager and the great Mr. Cheyne himself, and making everybody in the theatre miserable. As for the company and the musicians, Miss Cuthbert puts *them* in their proper places the very first day; for, according to her account, every instrument is out of tune, and not a man nor woman understands the business of the piece. 'Romeo' spoils all her best scenes; 'Mercutio' is a fool; the 'Friar' mumbles; the 'Nurse' doesn't know her words; and as for poor 'Lady Capulet,' she is struck speechless by the impatience and contempt shown to

her efforts, and retires to her dressing-room, crestfallen and in tears.

'*Never*,' she exclaims piteously to Betha, 'never in the whole course of my experience have I been so insulted and trodden on! *I* not able to speak Shakespeare! Why, Betha, I played "Prince Arthur" when I was only ten, and as for "Lady Capulet," and "Celia," and the "Player Queen," I have them all at my fingers' ends. Whatever can have induced uncle to engage that detestable woman for our "lead" I cannot imagine. I think she is hideous with that orange-coloured hair; and she speaks so low, her voice will be inaudible to the gallery.'

Betha cannot help smiling at her friend's distress, though she tries to comfort her.

'Never mind, Kate dear,' she says soothingly; 'it will all be right on Saturday—you'll see. Miss Cuthbert has a very unpleasant manner, but we need not have much to say to her; and as to her voice, she was

reserving it, she said, because she has a slight cold.'

'I don't believe it,' retorts Miss Kate, spitefully. 'I think she is a very over-rated person, and just as likely to break down as any of us—and I hope she will—for the sooner uncle packs her back to wherever she came from, the better.'

But Miss Kate's hopes are not fulfilled.

Miss Coralie Cuthbert is really clever; and as Betha watches her play 'Juliet,' on the night of her *débût* in Buton, she thinks she has never seen any acting that affected her so much.

Miss Cuthbert is too big and well developed for 'Juliet.' Was it not the elder Kean who said that no woman could play the part properly until she was three times the right age? But she is splendidly handsome, and has been well-drilled. There is no room for envy or malice in Betha's breast, as she regards her; she feels nothing but admi-

ration for the lovely woman in her lovely dresses, and with her mouth filled with the loveliest words. She follows her every movement like a cat watching a mouse; drinks in the modulation of each sentence that falls from her lips, and takes note of the slightest change in the expression of her face. And this, not for one night, but many.

'Romeo and Juliet' was announced for only one week; but it is received with so much enthusiasm by the inhabitants of Buton, that it is advertised to run a fortnight. And Betha is taking a fresh lesson every night, from the contemplation of Miss Cuthbert's movements and modulations. But though the 'star' is the talk of the town, she remains as unpopular as before behind the scenes. She is a person who can never see the policy of making friends with those beneath her in station, but on whose services she is greatly dependent for her success. Consequently, scarcely a hand in the

theatre will move to her assistance, unless expressly ordered to do so; and she has constantly to appeal to Mr. Cheyne to support her authority.

On the last day of 'Romeo and Juliet,' Miss Cuthbert is occupied during the morning with a rehearsal of 'As You Like It,' which is to be produced on the following evening. It is a dark gloomy day out of doors, and still darker and gloomier within the theatre. When the company assemble, the stage has not yet been cleared of the *débris* of the previous night, and Miss Cuthbert puts herself into a towering passion because the gasman is not at hand to turn on the gas at the main.

'I have sent for him to come at once. He only lives a few doors off,' says 'Orlando,' trying to assuage the storm.

'He ought to have been here to await my coming. I never met with such disrespect and inattention in my life. Where

is Mr. Cheyne?' exclaims Miss Cuthbert, loudly.

'Mr. Cheyne won't be here to-day, miss,' says a passing carpenter, with a grin of satisfaction. 'He ain't well, and he's keeping his bed.'

'Nonsense! he must be here! I won't allow the rehearsal to go on without him. There is not a soul in the place that has the slightest authority but himself. I was never in such an ill-regulated theatre in my life!'

'I beg your pardon, Miss Cuthbert,' remarks Kate Montalambert, coming forward. 'In my uncle's absence *I* am his representative here, and have quite as much authority as himself; therefore, if you have any particular request to make, perhaps you will be good enough to notify it to me.'

'Perhaps you will wait till you're spoken to,' replies Miss Cuthbert, rudely, as she turns her back upon the speaker. Then she begins to run about the stage, shouting to the

scene-shifters to do this—that—or the other, whilst the rest of the company, with many an unflattering comment on her behaviour, watch her proceedings. Suddenly they see her trip and fall. She has missed her footing over a rope, and been thrown against a portion of the scenery. The men rush to her assistance, but not a woman stirs.

'She may tumble all over the place before I'd lift a hand to help her,' says Miss Montalambert; 'and if she's hurt herself, so much the better.'

However, she alters her tone when the fact is made patent that Miss Coralie Cuthbert *has* hurt herself very much indeed. Her foot catching in the rope turned under her as she fell, and her ankle is severely sprained. Private spite is one thing; but it is a costly luxury when it has to be gratified at the expense of business.

Miss Montalambert sends at once for the nearest doctor, whilst the gentlemen of the

party carry the groaning 'star' into the green-room, and deposit her upon a sofa. The medical man is soon in attendance, but his verdict is very unfavourable. The ankle is seriously injured, and the complete rest of several days, if not weeks, is inevitable.

'You had much better have broken your leg at once,' he says, as consolation to Miss Cuthbert. 'I could have mended it in half the time for you.'

And then he bandages the sprained ankle, and directs them to have the suffering lady conveyed to her hotel and put to bed, where he will visit her again in the course of the afternoon. And so the fallen 'star' is taken home, and the remainder of the company look sadly at each other, and wonder what the issue of the accident will be. What is to become of 'Romeo and Juliet' on that evening? What of 'As You Like It,' on the following night?

CHAPTER IV.

'CAN I DO IT?'

Miss Montalambert sets off at once to give her uncle the first intimation of the accident that has occurred, and Betha walks home by herself. She is too unused as yet to theatrical life to be able to imagine what Mr. Cheyne can possibly do in such a dilemma, and visions of the theatre closing, and everybody being thrown out of work—or the pantomime being put on the stage again—or the whole company summoned at once to get up a new piece by seven o'clock that evening, chase each other vaguely through her mind. She is still lingering in her bedroom, busying

herself with the affairs of her wardrobe, when Miss Montalambert bursts upon her solitude.

'Home already, Kate!' exclaims Betha in surprise, 'why, how quick you have been! What does Mr. Cheyne say? What will he do?'

'He has come to tell you that himself, my dear; uncle came back with me. He is waiting to see you in the parlour!'

'Waiting to see *me*?' echoes Betha, struck by a certain look of important mystery in her friend's eyes.

'Yes! He's got something to say to you. Come along and see him at once. We have no time to spare!'

The manager of a theatre is as a king amongst his subjects to the members of his company, and Betha hurries to execute the royal commands.

'Well, my dear!' says Mr. Cheyne condescendingly as she enters the sitting-room

with Mrs. Potter, 'this is a nice sort of business, isn't it? Every stall booked for to-night, and four boxes bespoken for the Mayor of Buton and his party; and Miss Coralie bandaged up in her bed, and not likely to be able to put her foot to the ground for a fortnight!'

'Oh, Mr. Cheyne! it is the most unfortunate thing that could have happened. What *shall* we do? And you have had to leave your bed also—I hope you will take no harm!'

'I shall be right enough, my dear, if you'll do your best to help us out of the difficulty.'

'*I*—What can I do? Oh, Mr. Cheyne, you must know you have but to command me. Will you put the pantomime on again? Do you wish me to take a part? I have seen it so often that I think I could play any of the women's characters without a rehearsal.'

'No, no, child! that's not the way we do business in Buton. The public have been led to expect they will have "Romeo and Juliet" this evening, and "Romeo and Juliet" they must have. But to come to the point! I want you to play *Juliet!*'

If he had told the girl that he had a passport ready signed and sealed to pass her in at once to heaven, without further trouble, she could hardly have become more agitated. Her eyes dilate: her lips part: her colour comes and goes. She stands before him, crimson and silent, with the unshed tears standing in her eyes from astonishment, excitement, and delight.

'What do you think of *that*, dear?' says Miss Kate, as she puts her arm round the girl's waist and kisses her.

'*Can I do it?*' demands Betha in a tone of awe.

'Well, that remains to be proved,' says the more practical manager; 'but I think you

can scramble through it, if you try, and it'll be a relief to me if you will. I believe you know the part.'

'Every word of it, Mr. Cheyne—but it is so great—so unexpected an attempt. Suppose I should fail!'

'Oh! we've got no such word as that in the Buton dictionary,' he answers somewhat roughly. 'We shan't expect you to lord it over them in the style of the great Coralie you know; but if you'll do your best, child, why I shall be satisfied, and that is all you've got to care about.'

'Oh! I will do my best—my *very* best!' cries Betha excitedly; 'and Kate will help me—won't you, dear Kate?—and I think I know all the stage business, I have seen Miss Cuthbert play it so many times—and as for the words, they are nothing—but to-night, this very night—it seems awfully sudden. Is it not very presumptuous in me to undertake it?'

'Nonsense! I'm the best judge of that, my dear; and remember, you will only appear as a substitute. "Miss Selwyn has, at the last moment, kindly undertaken," etc, etc, so you need not have so many qualms on the subject. And now that is settled, I must be going, for we must call a rehearsal at four o'clock to run through your scenes. Kate, my dear, you must see after Miss Selwyn's dresses. The wardrobe-keeper has a very handsome set that were made for Thornton last year, but they'll require alteration for this child. Good-morning, my dear. Don't forget. Rehearsal at four;' and the good-natured manager leaves them to themselves.

Betha turns to confront her friend.

'Oh, Kate! is it possible?'

'I should just think it was, my dear; and what's more, I'm proud to say I did it. As soon as ever that wretch Cuthbert tumbled over the rope, I thought, "Here's an opening for Betha," and off I rushed to uncle, and

persuaded him to put you on. And you'll make a great success, I am sure of it; and you'll be the prettiest Juliet that ever trod on Buton boards.'

'Oh, Kate! how good and kind it was of you to think of me. But why didn't you get the part for yourself, dear? You have been much longer on the stage than I have, and are a more experienced actress. Surely you are fitter to take it than I can possibly be.'

Mrs. Potter blushes—actually and truly blushes through her 'make up' at her ingenuous friend's simplicity.

'No, dear! I'm not! Of course I could play the part if I chose, well enough, Uncle would have put me in it at once, but I wouldn't have accepted it. "Juliet" is supposed to be very young, and requires an unformed figure, and mine is altogether too *ripe* for the purpose. Gentlemen prefer ripe figures naturally—that is in private life—

but on the stage, one thinks more of the *character* than the individual; and a straight up and down figure like you, is always best for Juliet.'

By which speech it will be seen that Mrs. Potter, with all her love for Betha, is not quite above the little jealousies of sex.

If a *straight up and down figure* were all that is necessary to portray the character of Shakespeare's sweetest heroine, then indeed would she be admirably fitted for the part, for the 'ripeness' on which she lays such stress, is so admirably concealed that no one but herself has ever yet discovered it. But no one is perfect in this world, and poor Mrs. Potter has her weaknesses in common with the rest of us. Yet, though she is so certain she could play Juliet herself, there is no deception in her hearty desire to see Betha shine in it.

And Betha *does* shine beyond the anticipations of her kindest friends. The occupants

of the stalls and boxes that evening are greatly disappointed to find slips of paper in their seats announcing the lamentable news of Miss Cuthbert's accident, and the fact that Miss Selwyn will take her place. They growl to themselves and others, and vote the whole thing a delusion and a snare, and wish they had not been such fools as to book their places beforehand. But when the curtain rises and Betha steps upon the stage, their attention is first arrested and then enchained. A sweeter Juliet in appearance never graced the English boards. Betha's figure possesses all the willowy grace and suppleness which we attribute to the daughter of the Capulets, and her lovely face, with its cleanly cut features and beaming eyes, secures her an ovation directly she appears, which continues at intervals throughout the evening.

Mr. Cheyne, watching his débutante from a stage-box, is amazed at the force and delicacy of her acting.

'By George!' he exclaims, 'she only wants experience to beat the Cuthbert into fits!'

He has seen the girl perform in farces and melodramas for several months past, but never in a part calculated to draw out her tragic powers. 'But she can never go through the death-scene with equal force,' he thinks, working himself to a marvellous pitch of excitement at the success of his experiment. 'She is wonderful in the love-passages, but the poisoning scene will stump her!'

Yet it does not. It would be ridiculous to affirm that this young girl of seventeen plays like a Siddons or a Fanny Kemble, but she acts her part quite as well as they would have done at the same tender age, and the continued applause which she evokes is a proof of the power she wields over her audience.

Mr. Cheyne chuckles at each fresh outburst of approbation, but Betha herself

hardly hears it. She goes through the play as if she were in a dream, or rather, let me say, that for the time being life and her audience have become a dream, and Juliet's troubles are the only realities she knows. She loves with her, weeps with her, dies with her—and when in the last scene she flings herself across the breast of her prostrate Romeo, Betha works herself up to such a pitch of excitement that she closes her eyes and almost believes that death will come and take her as she lies there.

But the vision is soon dispelled by the fall of the curtain and the frantic shouts of the spectators. Romeo leaps to his feet and pulls Juliet up with him, and she has to undergo the ordeal of being dragged in front to receive the congratulations of the audience. In years to come, Betha will look to such a moment as the reward of her labour and the sign manual of her success; on this first occasion of her triumph she is too exhausted

to care about it. She has so wrought herself up to go through with the important duty she has undertaken, that the finish finds her pale, worn-out, and almost ready to fall into the arms of Kate Montalambert, who is, of course, the first behind the scenes to wish her joy of her success.

'You did it splendidly, dear, wonderfully! Everybody is astonished at your talent. I am sure I couldn't have done it better myself, with all my experience,' whispers her sympathetic friend.

'Good girl—good girl! I knew you could do it if you tried. We'll put you into Rosalind to-morrow,' is Mr. Cheyne's less gushing, though not less earnest, criticism. 'Take the child home, Kate, and give her a pint of stout and a dozen oysters. That's the proper thing to take after Juliet, and remember the rehearsal is called for ten o'clock to-morrow.'

And so Miss Coralie Cuthbert's accident is

an ill wind that blows some one good; and after a long night's rest, Elizabeth Selwyn wakes up to read the Buton criticisms and find herself famous.

CHAPTER V.

'I AM GOING TO LEAVE YOU.'

Buton is not a town the press criticisms of which are to be despised. Its well-organised theatre, which, under the able management of Mr. Cheyne, has turned out some of the finest actors and actresses of the day, has long been considered as the very cradle of Dramatic Art, and its public has been trained to know good acting from bad as well as any. Therefore, as Betha reads the flattering opinions of the *Buton Mercury*, and the *Buton Daily Press* and the *Western Planet*, on the morning following her *début* as Juliet, she can hardly believe they are intended for

herself. True genius is always linked with modesty, and it requires all Kate Montalambert's assurances to the contrary to convince Betha that the newspapers have not greatly overrated her abilities.

'And if you won't believe the critics, my dear, look here!' cries Mrs. Potter triumphantly, as she points to the advertisement column. 'I hope you will at least acknowledge that uncle knew what he was about when he sent in this announcement:

'"*Notice.*—In consequence of the unprecedented success of Miss Elizabeth Selwyn as Juliet, and the favour with which she was received by a crowded audience, Mr. Cheyne has the honour to announce that the play of 'Romeo and Juliet' will be repeated this night (Saturday), and during the ensuing week."

There, my dear, your appearance has had the

effect of keeping the same play on the boards for three consecutive weeks, and if you knew Buton, as well as I do, you would understand what a feather that is in your cap.'

'I am very glad,' says Betha. 'I like the part of Juliet much better than Rosalind, and should feel so very sorry not to play it again. Besides, I should like Rob to see me in it. He seems to think that acting consists only of pantomimes, and dances, and burlesque songs.'

'Oh, bother Rob!' cries Miss Kate, irreverently. 'I don't fancy you'll see much more of Rob now, my dear. It will be a short jump for you from Buton to London, and then you'll have half the nobs of the West End at your feet.'

'Kate,' says Betha, sedately, 'I wish you wouldn't talk like that. I am afraid you must think very badly of me to say so. What difference can my professional success make to my relations with Mr. Frere?

We are engaged, and nothing can alter that.'

'Well, we'll see, my dear!' is Miss Montalambert's incredulous reply; 'but anyhow, we must go down to the theatre now. This announcement makes no difference to our "call," and uncle will be vexed if we are late.'

The friends hurry off to the rehearsal, and the same evening Betha goes through her own part again, exciting still more enthusiasm than on the occasion of her first appearance.

On the next day—the day of rest for man and beast and actor alike, and the first moment in which Betha seems to have had time to think—there falls upon the girl a strange mingled feeling of content and melancholy.

Contented she certainly is. Her wildest hopes have been fulfilled, and she realises that the true secret of her life is found, and understands at last why her spirit seemed

chafed and fettered by the representation of chambermaids and second-rate ladies, when it was longing to soar into the highest regions of dramatic art.

She feels as if hitherto she had been dumb, and the happy experience of the last two nights had given her silver speech. She looks forward to illimitable progress in the future, whilst her mind travels quickly from one character to another, and she wants to play them all at once. But joined with this unbounded content comes a miserable despondency that there is no one to care for her success, nor to be proud of it, except herself.

Her friends and relations have cast her off. From her father and her Aunt Janie down to Lady Frere and Mrs. Matthews, all disown and repudiate her. Even Rob, who swears he would lay down his life for her sake—who actually did risk laying it down—even he is most anxious for the day

when he shall be able to take her off the stage.

'And what is she doing,' thinks Betha, sadly, 'to make good and bad people alike afraid and ashamed of her? What is there in her blameless life to cause any man or woman a blush to own her as a daughter or a friend?'

She cannot solve the riddle, but she feels very much alone, poor child, on this first day of her triumph, and as if the wider known her name becomes as a true exponent of the histrionic art, the more she will be shunned and execrated. She confides some of these thoughts to Miss Montalambert, who laughs at her for a simpleton.

'You're low, Betha, that's what it is, my dear. It's the reaction after all the excitement you've passed through. Who that wasn't a fool would despise you, who are working honestly for a livelihood, and paying your way as you go? Why, not half the

world can boast of doing as much! And as for those canting hyprocrites at Black Abbotts, don't you give them a second thought! I dare say, if the truth was known, that you'd hear some queer stories about them. Whenever I meet a woman without charity (and there are plenty of them knocking about), I always know she needs it from others. As you get on in life, child, you'll find scores of women draw up their skirts as you come by, who aren't pure enough to black your boots! And why? Because you're an actress! And if they don't make a show of extreme virtue in a direction where everybody can understand it, they may have awkward questions thrown in their teeth by those who do not. It's the common idea, Betha, that the danger of losing our good names comes to us through the other sex; but it's not true. It's the women, and mostly the unclean women, who try to filch from us what they know they have

lost themselves. Keep clear of women, Betha! Don't have too much to say to the men, either—by which I mean, take all you can get out of them, and give them nothing in return; but, whatever you do, steer clear of the women! All the troubles of our lives come from them. We confide in them, and they betray us—we try to help them, and they lay the blame of failure on our shoulders. They come between us and our lovers—they carry lies of us to our husbands—they pick open our letters and listen at our keyholes. There is nothing in this world too small, or mean, or petty, or dishonourable for a woman to do!'

'Oh, Kate!' cries Betha, reproachfully; 'and when you have been so good to me! Aren't you a woman? And yet how kind and generous you are——'

'Well, I'm not quite sure about that, my dear! I hope I'm not quite so bad as those I speak of; but then there's no cant about

me, you know. I don't pretend to be good. But I've got my meannesses too. I suppose that's not to be entirely avoided, but sometimes I feel awfully ashamed of myself, and wish to goodness I had been born the commonest male creature out.'

'I wish you had been,' replies Betha, laughing; 'and then I would have married you, dear, and we would always have lived together.'

'Don't you think so much about *marrying!*' retorts Mrs. Potter, sharply. 'It's the ruin of the stage, Betha; and if you intend to throw away all your chances of success in that fashion, you'd better give it up at once. What is the use of your slaving for the next two or three years to get to the top of the tree, if you mean to marry at the end of them? For my part, I wish you had never met this Mr. Frere. You can't enter into an engagement like other girls, just for the fun of the thing—you look at it in far too serious

a light—and in the end it will be your ruin!'

'But I don't want to be married, Kate,' says Betha, seriously; 'I would much rather not—only, I promised, you see, and it would be very dishonourable to break my word—only, it is not to take place for a very, very long time, not till Sir Willoughby and Lady Frere are both dead, so there is no need even to think of such a thing.'

'And suppose Mr. Frere were to marry someone else, meanwhile, what then, Betha?' demands her friend inquisitively.

'I shouldn't mind,' says the girl; 'indeed, I should be very glad. Rob wouldn't marry another girl unless he liked her more than me, so it would be all the better for us both, wouldn't it?'

'It is very evident that "Cupid hath not clapped you on the shoulder!"' exclaims Miss Kate, laughing; 'and I am glad of it, Betha, for I fancy you would be a horribly

moony-spoony sort of girl if you were in love, and a nuisance to yourself and everybody else. No, no, dear! Don't you compromise yourself till you get to London, and then, if you don't get the chance of a coronet, I shall say it's all your own fault!'

As Betha comes off the stage after the first act on Monday evening, Lady Capulet meets her mysteriously at the wings.

'My dear! who's the stranger in the stage-box who kept his glasses fixed on you the whole time you've been on?'

'How should I know, Kate? I never see anybody when I'm playing.'

'You goose! Wait till you've had *my* experience, and you'll be able to count the house in the middle of your most impassioned scenes. But really, he is a most distinguished looking man.'

'Yes!'

'How indifferent you profess to be. How I have been puzzling my brains to guess who

he is. Perhaps it's Mr. Carlton, the member for Buton.'

'May be.'

'But why should he come alone, and have a whole box to himself? Betha, I am sure you have made a conquest! I caught sight of a big bouquet just now, in the back of the box. Suppose it should be Lord Trevanion! What a triumph! And he is such a good-looking fellow, and been a widower for the last two years.'

'What should that matter to me, Kate?'

'Don't you see, you silly thing, that he could make your fortune if he chose? It's someone that's taken a fancy for you, I'm sure. *Do* look at him, next time you go on, and see if he is a friend of yours.'

'I will try, Kate, but the footlights dazzle my eyes so, I can seldom distinguish features.'

However, she does turn her gaze in the direction of the stage-box on the next oppor-

tunity, and only encounters an empty space. The mysterious stranger has either had enough of her acting, or withdrawn himself for the purposes of refreshment.

'He is gone,' she says to Mrs. Potter when they meet again.

'No such thing, my dear! He was only hiding behind the curtains. I know their tricks. I had a good look at him just now, and he is very like the Duke of Cambridge. Supposing it should be his Royal Highness? Why, he might make you a manageress at once if he chose!'

Betha laughs immoderately at the idea.

'Oh, Kate! you are too funny! I am afraid I should have to manage the duke before he set me to manage the theatre, and I have never understood him to be so zealous a patron of the drama yet!'

'It is all very well to laugh, Betha, but there is no doubt that gentleman is someone of great importance, and if you throw away

every chance that comes to you in this way, you'll never get to the top of the tree!'

At this dismal prospect Betha tries to look properly serious, and when, with the fall of the curtain, a large bouquet, skilfully directed from the stage-box, falls right at her feet, she curtsies low to the mysterious stranger, with a face beaming with gratitude.

'You have got it! I knew you would,' cries Mrs. Potter triumphantly, as she seizes upon Betha and the bouquet; 'and he is coming round, my dear! the box-keeper says so: I couldn't catch his name, but I feel more sure than ever that it is either Lord Trevanion or the Duke of Cambridge.'

'Oh! let it be Lord Trevanion, please! the duke's married!' exclaims Betha merrily, just as her friend says: 'Hush! hush! don't talk so loud. Here he is!' and she looks round to encounter the burly form and twinkling eyes of Mr. Henderson. In a moment she has darted to his side.

'Oh, how glad I am to see you! How are dear Mrs. Henderson and old Trim? And was it you just now in the stage-box? And what brings you down to Buton? And did you throw me this beautiful bouquet?'

'Here's a host of questions!' exclaims Mr. Henderson; 'which am I to answer first? I came down to Buton to see you play Juliet, and I threw you the bouquet, because you are a good little girl, and have minded what I taught you.'

'How kind of you to say so! How did you hear I was playing Miss Cuthbert's part? Did Mr. Cheyne send you the papers?'

'Yes; Cheyne sent me the papers; but I thought it best to run down and judge for myself of your progress, and I would not tell you first, for fear my presence might make you nervous. But I have been watching you from behind the curtain the whole evening, and I am very pleased with you.'

'And Kate thought you were the Duke of Cambridge!' cries Betha, laughing.

'Bother the Duke of Cambridge,' says the blunt manager, 'I'm worth fifty dukes put together to you. The whole peerage couldn't do as much for you as I can. But you had better go home now, my dear, and I'll see you the first thing in the morning. I must be back in town by three o'clock, without fail.'

Miss Kate Montalambert finds Betha after that interview in a very April condition—with tears in her eyes, but smiles upon her face, and a look as if she had not quite made up her mind whether to be glad or sorry.

'Oh, Kate!' she says, impulsively, 'I am going to leave you.'

'To leave us, dear!' echoes Mrs. Potter.

'Yes! Mr. Henderson says he has given the usual fortnight's notice to Mr. Cheyne, and at the end of that time, provided Miss

Cuthbert is well again, I am to join him in London. I am apprenticed to him, you know, and bound to do as he tells me—and he means to bring me out at the "Marlborough."'

Mrs. Potter flies into her friend's arms, and for a few minutes they cry together.

'Well, dear! I shall be awfully sorry to lose you,' says the elder woman, as she wipes her eyes; 'and I can't think what the theatre will look like to me, when you are gone; but still, it is a rise for you, and that is the proper light in which to regard it. Of course, the duke (I shall always call Mr. Henderson "the duke" now, Betha) is proud of your progress, and wants to reap the benefit of it. I wonder what he will bring you out in, Betha? I shall be so curious to learn.'

'He says as Desdemona or Juliet. They have Montgomery Warren, the great Shakesperian actor, at the Marlborough Theatre, at present, and Mr. Henderson is

not satisfied with the juvenile lead. But it is a tremendous jump for me, Kate! I hope my sudden elevation won't make me giddy. So many stop half-way to fame because of self-esteem!'

'There's no fear that you will, Betha! you are the most diffident girl I know! Just think of that cheeky creature, Carry Carrington, coming down to take first boy in the pantomime, with scarcely a note in her voice, and feet stretching from here to Jericho! *That* was self-esteem, if you like.'

'*That* was utter incompetence,' says Betha, smiling; 'I am not afraid of committing myself to quite such an extent as that.'

'Mr. Henderson will take care you don't commit yourself at all, my dear,' is her friend's reply. 'He hasn't been stage managing half the theatres in London for the last fifty years for nothing, I can tell you, and knows gold from pinchbeck at a glance.'

But though Betha expects her friends to be

sorry she is going to leave Buton, she is hardly prepared for the effect the intelligence produces upon Bobby Frere. They are alone when she breaks the news to him, and the young fellow has great difficulty in keeping back his tears.

'Going back to London!' he exclaims, piteously. 'Oh, Betha! for how long?'

'For how long?' repeats Betha, hardly able to avoid laughing at her lover's comical exhibition of distress; 'why, for ever, I suppose, Rob. At least, if I am lucky enough to obtain anything like a position there, I am not likely to relinquish it again. You know a London appearance is the grand aim and object of all the actors' hopes. It is our paradise: our promised land! We get no appreciation that is really worth anything unless it has been endorsed by the London press!'

'But what am I to do without you?' says Bobby, despairingly. 'How am I to see you if you go to London?'

Betha looks grave.

'I am sorry for you, Rob,' she answers; 'but it cannot be helped. You would not care for my being on the stage and making no effort to advance. I must go on and on, till I get to the very top of the tree. Then, perhaps, you will have reason to be proud of me.'

'I don't want to be prouder of you than I am—and I wish you had never seen the stage,' says Bobby, impatiently; 'I hate it, and everything on it! Oh, how I wish that I had a thousand a year of my own, that I might take you off it to-morrow, and never let you enter a theatre again!'

And how sincerely glad Betha is, as she sits beside him, to think that he is quite incapable of putting his threat into execution. To take her off the stage just as she has been thought worthy to play Juliet, and set her down for life by the side of Bobby Frere! The girl shudders inwardly at the idea—were

he rich, she would consider it necessary to communicate her feelings to him—but as it is, she thinks it kinder to be silent and try to soothe his distress.

'You mustn't make so much of a little parting,' she says, cheerfully; 'Buton is only one hundred miles from London, you know, and you are constantly backwards and forwards. And then I shall write to you, Rob, every week at the least, and tell you all that I am doing, and all that I have seen.'

But Rob refuses to be comforted.

'I shall go mad cooped up at Baron's Court whilst you are fluttering about in London with a lot of howling cads at your heels. I can hardly bear it even down here in Buton, but it will be a thousand times worse then. I shall kill my grandmother, or do something desperate—see if I don't!'

Betha does not know whether to laugh or cry. She cannot entirely sympathise with Bobby's distress at their parting; on the

contrary, it is a great relief to her to think that she will not be so constantly subjected to listen with a callous ear to his longwinded tale of love. She is awfully sorry for him—sorry, because she cannot feel all that he describes his heart to do, and is fearful lest she should be a cold-blooded sort of person who can never prove anything but a disappointment to him; but, at the same time, it is a real comfort to her to know that she will be, for the present at least, free from his espionage and constant abuse of her profession, and that she will not be called upon to give him kisses on demand, or to sit close to him on the sofa and pretend to like it. Deception is abhorrent to her nature, and poor Betha is already beginning to suspect that she has deceived herself with regard to her feelings for Bobby Frere. And when they are separated, perhaps he may forget her—happy thought!—or see *someone* he likes better; and then, she will be free and happy

again as she was before they met. Bobby's groans and complaints do not cease until the last day she spends in Buton, when he goes in company with Kate Montalambert to see her off by the London train.

'Good-bye, my darling!' he exclaims, much to Betha's disgust, before all the passengers; 'this place will be unendurable when you are gone! and I shall be with you again before you expect to see me.'

'But I thought your people were not coming to town till the season,' replies Betha, not over pleased at the prospect of losing the two months' grace she has been looking forward to.

'No more they are,' says Bobby, mysteriously; 'but I don't think I shall wait for them. I have a prospect—that is, I have written—but never mind!' he exclaims, breaking off suddenly. 'Nothing is settled yet, but, as soon as I am certain, you shall know!'

And Betha, having embraced Kate Montalambert for the last time, is whisked off to London, revolving in her mind what Rob's half given confidence can possibly allude to.

CHAPTER VI.

'YOU OUGHT TO KNOW EACH OTHER.'

As Betha re-enters the Hendersons' house, she feels more like coming 'home' than she has done since her mother died. The old lady receives her with open arms, and the fat terrier Trim evinces his delight at seeing her again by elephantine leaps in the air, which are summarily cut short by an asthmatic cough, which causes him to retreat, considerably subdued in manner, to his basket.

And Betha is ready to return the greetings offered her with interest. The cries in the streets, the rattle of cabs, the bustle and commotion of the great city, seem to infuse

fresh life into her veins, and fill her with a great pride to think that she claims a place amongst the labourers of the earth—that she belongs to the working bees, and not to the drones of London.

She soon learns that she has been formally engaged at the Marlborough Theatre, and is to receive two pounds a week from her salary for her private expenses. Two pounds each week to spend upon herself! Betha feels as if some fairy godmother had suddenly endowed her with a fortune, and cannot sufficiently express her gratitude, which Mr. Henderson accepts as a matter of course.

Doubtless, that astute old gentleman knows what he is about, and probably pockets two pounds for each one he bestows upon his pupil. Still, the girl is perfectly happy and satisfied with the arrangement, and considers herself the luckiest creature in the world. She sets to work on the tasks allotted her with spirit and energy, and

accomplishes them so well, that in the course of a month all London is familiar with the name and appearance of the young actress who is nightly drawing crowded houses to the Marlborough. One of the first from amongst her old acquaintances to seek out Betha, and congratulate her on her success, is Mattie Kemyss, now Mrs. Conrad Levison.

Mattie is as lovely as ever, perhaps more so: and Betha finds her quite as affectionate. She lives in one of the best houses in Queen's Gate, and she drives the handsomest horses in London; but she is as girlish and unsophisticated and as delighted to talk to Betha as she used to be in the old days when they were schoolfellows together at Princess College.

'You will come and see me, darling, as soon as ever you can, won't you?' she says, on the occasion of their first meeting. 'I've got an awfully jolly house, twice as big as papa's, and fourteen servants (we alway

said we'd like to have lots of servants, didn't we? you and I), and a stable full of horses. I can lend you a riding-horse, if you would like a gallop sometimes, Betha; for I have two, and I never mount anything but my mare, Zoé. She's such a pet; bright bay, with a star on her forehead, and as gentle as a lamb.'

'Fourteen servants, and a stable full of horses! You *are* a lucky girl, Mattie,' says Betha, laughing; 'and I hope you are very happy, dear, with all these good things, and want nothing further.'

Mrs. Levison colours, and looks lovelier than before.

'Oh yes! I'm happy enough! and I *ought* to be, oughtn't I? By the way, Betha, do you remember Carry Pattison at college—a little creature with reddish hair?'

'Perfectly! She was a very good-natured girl. What of her?'

'She was married the same week as myself,

to a Mr. Harvey, a clerk I think, or something of that sort; and for curiosity's sake I went to see her the other day, and fancy! I found her living in a couple of rooms out at Notting Hill, and with a baby of six weeks old! Such a wretched arrangement altogether. I wonder the poor girl doesn't cut her throat.'

'Oh! I dare say she is happy enough, that is if she loves her husband,' replies Betha, musingly. 'Fancy little Carry Pattison with a baby! How funny! And there is no baby at Queen's Gate yet, eh, Mattie?'

'Thank heaven, no!' exclaims Mrs. Levison, emphatically; 'and I sincerely trust there never will be!'

'Mattie!' says Betha, reproachfully. To a true-hearted woman, it seems so strange that any wife should not wish to be a mother.

'I *do!*' repeats Mattie, boldly. 'What do you suppose I want a nasty squalling little brat for? to spoil half my pleasure, and keep

me at home when I want to go out. You don't know yet, either, how agreeable Mr. Levison can make himself in his own house, or you would not expect me to want to see his temper reproduced in his offspring.'

'Oh, Mattie! then you are *not* happy!' exclaims Betha.

'Indeed I *am*, my dear! I've learned to make myself so, exclusive of my surroundings. And now that you have come to town you will greatly add to my happiness. I am longing to see you at Queen's Gate! When will you come, Betha?'

'I have no day to myself but Sunday,' replies her friend; 'but if you will have me then, I will be with you at any hour you like to name.'

'Sunday will do charmingly,' says Mattie, 'and especially as it is Mr. Levison's day for visiting his own friends. Come as early as you can, Betha, and we will have a long day together.'

Betha's first visit to Queen's Gate confirms all that Mrs. Levison has told her with regard to her riches. The house teems with evidences of wealth, and in the midst of satin-covered sofas and gilded chairs, costly china and valuable paintings, hothouse flowers and velvet-pile carpets, Mattie sits like some fair piece of Dresden china, clothed in the finest tissues and hung with precious stones; but yet with a look of dissatisfaction and longing on her face which makes itself too evidently seen and felt, even in her moments of excitement.

'I suppose you've heard that your papa and Mrs. Durant have gone abroad, Betha?' she says, shortly after their reunion. 'Yes! it is true. I fancy the lady found that most of your mamma's old friends hung aloof from her, and that one or two awkward stories were afloat relative to your leaving home, and so they let their new house at Primrose Hill, and have gone, I think, to Brussels. Anyway, London knows them no more.'

'I am glad of that,' says Betha, though the tears stand in her eyes the while. 'I should have liked to see dear little Hyacinth again; but it would have been very painful to come across either papa or Mrs. Durant. So it is better as it is, perhaps.'

'But your aunt, Mrs. Chapman, is in town, and so is her daughter. I met them last week in the Gardens. I suppose you will see them, Betha?'

'I think not, Mattie. I certainly shall not go to their house unless they first hold out the hand of reconciliation. Aunt Janie needlessly insulted me at a time when I was very friendless and unhappy; and though I hope I am not hard-hearted, I have a great deal of pride left, for my dear mother's sake.'

'And so you ought to be proud,' cries Mattie, fervently. 'Mr. Clifford says you are the most talented girl that has appeared on the stage since he can remember. He was enchanted with your Desdemona, the

other night. He could not take his eyes off you.'

'And who may Mr. Clifford be?' asks Betha, smiling.

'Haven't you heard of Geoffrey Clifford, the *jeune premier* of the Frivolity. Oh! he is *so* handsome, and he has *such* a voice! What a pity you can't go and see him play!'

'Do you mean Mr. Clifford, the actor? Of course I have heard of him. Kate Montalambert kept his photograph on account of its beauty. How did you come to know him, Mattie? Have you many theatrical acquaintances?'

Mrs. Levison blushes crimson.

'No—very few. How did I become acquainted with Mr. Clifford? I really can't remember. Somebody introduced him, I suppose. But his portraits do not do him justice. The charm of his face lies in its expression. You should see him play Claude Melnotte. Perhaps he may look in this

afternoon. He sometimes does on Sundays. It is *his* only spare time, you know, as well as yours.'

And indeed, even as Mattie is speaking, a knock at the hall-door announces a fresh arrival, and Mr. Geoffrey Clifford is shown into the room. The first thought Betha entertains concerning him is, that he justifies Mrs. Levison's praises. A tall, slight man, of about thirty, with an easy graceful manner, and a peculiarly sweet expression of countenance Geoffrey Clifford bears on his person the unmistakable signs of being a gentleman. He is fair as the day, and, with the exception of a small moustache, wears no hair about his face. His golden fleece is close shorn in military fashion; his complexion is clear as a child's; his teeth, white and even. Added to the beauty of his person, he is dressed in the latest fashion, yet without any signs of coxcombry, and looks as if he had just stepped from his

bath, perfumed and anointed, and put on everything fresh and clean.

This may seem an ignoble basis in the eyes of some on which to plant the first tiny seed of love; but to a gentlewoman it possesses an indescribable charm. I think even Cupid himself would have appeared less lovable in the eyes of Psyche, had he visited her with disordered locks and ruffled wings.

Betha has heard of Mr. Clifford and his talent long before; in fact, she knows everything concerning his theatrical career. She has heard of his success as Claude Melnotte and Charles Surface, and Romeo, and the various characters in which our *jeunes premiers* make it their ambition to shine, and is quite prepared to admire him accordingly.

And Mr. Clifford, who has seen her on the stage more than once, is not slow to reciprocate the compliment.

'Surely I need not introduce you to Miss Selwyn!' exclaims Mattie when she has

shaken hands with him. 'Two such famous people ought to know each other by instinct.'

'I should have recognised Miss Selwyn anywhere,' says Geoffrey Clifford, bowing to Betha; 'although I have not hitherto had the honour of claiming her personal acquaintance. I was lucky enough to have a spare evening last week, Miss Selwyn, in which to conduct Mrs. Levison to the Marlborough to see "Othello," and we were enchanted—simply *enchanted!* Weren't we, Mrs. Levison?'

'I am glad you were pleased,' replies Betha, blushing ruddily under his praise. 'Mr. Warren is very good as Othello, is he not? I never heard such power as he throws into the scene where Iago rouses his jealousy.'

'I think Mr. Clifford would have liked to strangle him when he smothered Desdemona,' says Mattie; 'at least if I may judge from the expression his countenance assumed.'

'I never had any sympathy with the character,' replies her visitor; 'I always considered Othello to be a weak, revengeful fool, and I am sure that if Desdemona had only shown a little more spirit he wouldn't have dared to put her out of the way in so summary a manner.'

'Oh! now *I* am going to catch it,' says Betha, laughing; but Mr. Clifford stops her with the assurance that though Shakespeare may be open to criticism, it would be impossible to find any fault with her impersonation of Desdemona.

'Are you strictly a Shakespearian actress, Miss Selwyn, or have you attempted the melodramatic line?' he asks presently.

'Well, to speak strictly, Mr. Clifford, I may almost say this is my first appearance in any line. I have been matriculating for the profession for the last twelvemonth in Buton, but never had the chance of making a mark till now. My first venture,

however, was as Pauline in the "Lady of Lyons."'

'Ah! what a sweet play it is! It is useless to tell me it is mawkish, high-flown, and stagey! I know it well; but it will retain its place of favour with the multitude when stronger pieces are forgotten.'

'Because the hero is a common labourer who proves himself to be as good and better than any of the gentlemen represented—that is the most unnatural part of the play, Mr. Clifford, and that is what wins it such applause from the *oi polloi*. It is a radical piece, and I am strictly conservative; therefore, though I allow it is pretty, I have never felt much interest in it.'

'You believe, then, in birth?' says Mr. Clifford suddenly, turning to her.

'Most decidedly I do; and still more in the education of generations. It is that which will raise our profession at last to what it should be—the noblest in the world. Now

it is looked down upon, contemned and degraded, because most of its members, instead of bringing to it the fruits of their study, have joined it in so raw a condition that they have had to be educated up to its requirements before they could fulfil the least of them. People are surprised,' continues Betha, modestly, 'when a girl like myself makes a successful appearance on the stage; but granted the dramatic instinct, every actress should be able to do the same who has studied elocution, and been taught to walk and stand and sit like a lady.'

'Where were you taught?' demands Clifford, eagerly.

'At the Princess College. Mrs. Levison and I were educated there together.'

'Now, my dear child,' cries Mattie, 'please don't say anything about me, or Mr. Clifford may begin to compare notes. Betha and I were certainly schoolfellows at the same college, but as for my being educated

with her, why I never learned anything I could possibly help. Now did I, Betha?'

'You generally got a prize, Mattie!'

'Yes, because papa was rich and paid all extras, and they were afraid that if I didn't seem to get on, he would take me away. By the way, Betha, I met Miss Denny the other day, and told her I had seen you, and she looked so dreadfully shocked, and said, "Surely, my dear Mrs. Levison, you do not keep up any communication with that poor lost soul?" So then I asked her to come and meet you at luncheon some day, and she nearly fainted then and there.'

'Mattie, how *could* you? Fancy asking Miss Denny to meet an actress! She must have thought you wished to insult her. I have experienced more than one proof since joining the profession of the estimation in which actresses are held by the general public.'

'But you do not let it annoy you, surely,' says Mr. Clifford.

'No, indeed. So long as my friends appreciate my motives I care nothing for the private opinion of the general public.'

'They must be proud who are admitted to the privilege of enrolling themselves in the number of your friends,' he answers softly.

Mrs. Levison appears to find the conversation somewhat tedious. She jumps up to create a diversion.

'Now if you good people cannot find anything more entertaining to talk about than the education of the masses, and the opinion of the general public, I shall go to sleep,' she says merrily. 'Mr. Clifford, be good enough to ring the bell for me. We will have afternoon tea.'

He does her bidding, but will not resume his seat.

'Surely you are not going,' says Mattie, with an air of disappointment.

'I am afraid I *must*, Mrs. Levison. I have an engagement at Madame Roccabelli's

this afternoon which I cannot evade. Had I but known I should have the pleasure of meeting Miss Selwyn here, I would have managed better; as it is, I have no alternative but most unwillingly to take my leave.'

'That is complimentary to *me*,' pouts Mattie.

Geoffrey Clifford does not answer, but he raises his eyes to hers, and Betha sees the look which is exchanged between them.

As soon as he has taken his departure Mrs. Levison is loud in his praise. Is he not handsome, clever, agreeable, and fascinating! and she calls upon Betha to endorse her estimation of him.

'Yes,' says candid Betha, 'he *is* very good-looking, and he talks well, and looks like a gentleman. But is he—do you think he is *good*, Mattie?'

'What do you mean by *good?*' demands Mattie, somewhat confused.

'I do not mean religious. Few young men are that, unfortunately. I mean, is he good-hearted? Would he refrain from doing anything he wished because it was not quite honourable, or it hurt another's feelings, or was beneath himself as a man?'

'What a funny girl you are, Betha, with your extraordinary surmises! I really don't know, but I suppose he would, as much as any other gentleman.'

'He is much handsomer than his photographs,' adds Betha, musingly; 'and he must be very clever. I wonder who he is and where he comes from? Do you know his real name, Mattie?'

'No. I never heard he had another. He was introduced to me as Mr. Clifford.'

The truth is, he has never been introduced to Mattie at all; she picked up his acquaintance of her own accord, but she is too much afraid of Betha's reproaches to make her cognisant of that fact: and after a few more

remarks, Mr. Clifford's name drops out of the conversation. But it is by no means the last time that Betha meets him in the company of her friend.

Mattie seems to have very few female acquaintances, and she clings to Betha as having been associated with her maiden days. Occasionally some of Mr. Levison's relatives call at Queen's Gate: fat, handsome women, gorgeously arrayed, and scented like a perfumer's shop, who stay for a few minutes, fixing Betha with their big black eyes, and then shake out their voluminous drapery, and with many promises of a speedy return, drive away.

But Mattie is generally alone, unless Mr. Geoffrey Clifford keeps her company, and wiles away the afternoon hours with his fascinating conversation, or by singing *chansonnettes* in a rich baritone voice, to his own accompaniment on the piano.

Mr. Conrad Levison, Betha seldom sees;

and when they do meet, he regards her with a cold and suspicious eye that does not make her anxious for a closer companionship. Indeed, she has not seen Mattie again for many weeks, before the young wife has confided to her how unhappy she is in her married life. She fears her husband as much as she dislikes him, and often assures her friend that she lives in daily terror of her life.

But she appears to forget all her anxieties and sorrows in the presence of Mr. Clifford.

Betha is troubled. She is not so ignorant as to be unaware that when a married woman has no sympathy with, nor affection for, her husband, it is very dangerous for her to cultivate an intimacy with any other man.

She cannot help seeing the fitful colour that comes and goes on Mattie's lovely cheeks when Geoffrey Clifford's step is heard upon the stairs; nor the look of disappointment

that settles down upon her face when the day draws to a close without his making his appearance. She perceives the temporary coolness which occasionally springs up between Mrs. Levison and herself when Mr. Clifford has devoted the greater part of his time to her amusement, and cannot misinterpret the flush of annoyance that spreads over Mattie's countenance if any word or deed of the young actor is found fault with.

Betha has on several occasions, also, met Mattie driving in a close carriage with Mr. Clifford by her side—has more than once, too, surprised the pair at luncheon together in Queen's Gate, without the chaperonage of Mr. Levison, and looking very awkward at her unexpected appearance.

Thinking over these things in the quiet of her own home, and feeling keenly for the scrape in which her friend would find herself should Mr. Levison discover her proceedings, Betha determines to do the most foolish

thing possible, and that is to speak to Mattie on the subject.

Were she a woman of the world, she would pick up a snake by the wayside and carry it home in her bosom, sooner than risk the consequences of attacking a married lady on the subject of her unlicensed flirtations. But Betha is not a woman of the world. She is still a child—innocent of evil, and only anxious to be a true and sincere friend to one who has befriended her.

She does not suspect guilt, or even think of it. She only sees that Mattie is silly and imprudent, and may suffer from the effects of her folly if not warned in time. And so goes to her, pure of all intention excepting to do good; and in her endeavour to benefit another, brings down upon her own guiltless head the greatest calamity her life shall know.

CHAPTER VII.

'WAS THERE ANYTHING WRONG?'

This friendly but ill-advised action is forced upon Betha Durant after this fashion. As she is leaving the stage-door one night to get into the cab that is waiting for her (she is not so lucky as some young actresses of the present day, who cannot play either Juliet or Desdemona, but whose merits can yet command a brougham and pair of horses to convey them to a villa in the suburbs as soon as their duties at the theatre are concluded), as she is just stepping over the threshold the figure of a man (in whom, to her astonishment, she recognises Mr.

Levison) jostles her somewhat rudely in the doorway.

'I have been waiting for you, Miss Selwyn,' he says, abruptly. 'Where is my wife?'

'*Your wife?*' repeats Betha, in her amazement; 'how should I know, Mr. Levison? Why do you ask *me?*'

'Because she has been spending the day with you; and I wish her to come home at once.'

'But it is not true! You have been misinformed,' replies Betha. 'I have not seen Mattie since last Sunday, when we walked in Kensington Gardens together.'

'*With* Mr. Clifford, of course?' sneers Mr. Levison.

'Mr. Clifford did join us; is there any harm in that?'

'Oh, certainly not! There never *is* any harm about these clandestine appointments. But please to tell me what is the meaning of

that?' continues the irate husband, as he thrusts an open telegram into her hand.

'Really, Mr. Levison, I cannot discuss such matters with you at the stage-door. If you will drive home with me, I will answer any question you may wish to ask.'

He hands her into the cab sullenly, and they drive to Mr. Henderson's house in silence. When they have entered the sitting-room, Betha again turns to her visitor.

'Now I will look at the telegram, if you desire it?'

It is as follows, dated from Betha's address:

'*From* *To*

'Mrs. Levison, Conrad Levison, Esq.,

'*I am spending the day with Miss Selwyn, and shall accompany her to the theatre. Tell Dickins to sit up for me.*'

As Betha reads this falsehood, she turns

very pale. Deceit is foreign to her nature, and she cannot understand it in that of others.

'This must be a mistake,' she says quietly, as she returns Mr. Levison the paper. 'Your wife has not been here to-day.'

'I thought as much! I knew as much!' he returns, firmly, as he crushes the telegram in his hand; 'and that is the reason I was determined to see you and learn the truth. She is with that low cad Clifford, somewhere; and thinks to dupe me with this pretence of visiting you. But my eyes are opened at last—at last!'

Betha cannot help an inward smile at the idea of Conrad Levison calling Geoffrey Clifford a 'low cad,' but she respects the husband's natural anger too much to give any open vent to her amusement. All her care is lest Mattie should suffer from the effects of her imprudence.

'Mr. Levison, don't do or say anything

rashly,' she pleads; 'Mattie may have intended coming to me when she sent this message, and changed her mind afterwards. Have you been home since you received it?'

'No! She knew that I should probably have business to detain me in the city, and only sent her telegram in case of my plans being altered. I shall not be in Queen's Gate again until to-morrow afternoon; but she shall know, by that time, who is master in my house, and who *not*.'

And Mr. Levison leaves Betha's presence as abruptly and rudely as he entered it, with his telegram in his hand.

Her first thought is for silly, pretty, imprudent Mattie! What can she have been thinking of to run such a risk of discovery? Betha—as has been said before—has no suspicion of the existence of actual evil, but she longs to fly to the protection of her friend, as she used to do in the old college days, when

Mattie was behindhand with her verb or her theme, and Betha wrote them off for her whilst the class was waiting.

At an unusually early hour the next morning, she is demanding admittance to the presence of Mrs. Levison, whom she finds in an elegant white and blue *peignoir*, with her hair down her back, drinking chocolate in her dressing-room.

'Why, Betha, whatever brings you here at this unearthly hour? Is the Marlborough burned down?' demands Mattie, with one of her lovely languid smiles.

'No, Mattie! but something of much greater consequence (at least to you) has occurred;' and then Betha goes on quickly to relate the circumstances that took place the night before. 'So I came to you as soon as possible,' she continues, 'that you might hear it before Mr. Levison returns home, and be prepared to give him an explanation.'

'And do you mean to say that you actually told him the telegram was a *ruse?*' exclaims Mrs. Levison, turning very pale.

'What else could I do, Mattie? Your husband commenced accusing you of spending the day with me. I did not know he was laying a trap for you. I had no alternative but to deny it.'

'And do you call yourself my *friend?*' says the other, bitterly.

Betha is staggered by the retort. In her eyes Friendship and Truth are inseparable, and she does not understand how she can have done her friend an injury by being sincere.

'Would you have had me tell a falsehood!' she exclaims. 'Mattie dear, indeed I *am* your friend. Have I not always been so, from the days when we were almost children at college together? And if I have brought trouble on you I am very *very* sorry, but how can I have done so? Was there any-

thing wrong, Mattie, about that telegram, and did you really wish Mr. Levison to think that you had spent the day with me?'

'*Was there anything wrong about that telegram?*' repeats Mattie, sarcastically. 'Betha! you are a humbug! I don't believe you are so innocent as you profess to be. Why, of course it was a *ruse de guerre.* Mr. Clifford and I were at the Crystal Palace together all day, enjoying ourselves like anything; and I went to the Frivolity in the evening, and saw him play in "The Rightful Heir." Oh, he *was* so charming—perfectly divine!'

'But why didn't you tell your husband the truth, and save yourself all this trouble, Mattie?' says Betha.

'Tell him the truth, child! Do you suppose Conrad would let me go about with Geoffrey Clifford, and dine with him at the Palace? Why, he's as jealous as Othello! He'd cut my throat first.'

A cloud settles on Betha's brow. She sees it all now. There is something to be concealed, therefore there must be something wrong. And she has been made the scapegoat for Mattie's imprudent conduct.

'It was not fair to bring *my* name into the matter,' she says in a tone of vexation.

'Anything's fair in love or war, my dear,' replies her friend, lightly.

'But, Mattie, this can't be *love!* You are a married woman.'

Mrs. Levison's eyes fall beneath her gaze.

'Oh, Mattie! it is very *very* wrong! Pray consider what you are doing! If you think about Mr. Clifford in *that* way, you ought never to see him again.'

'Really, Betha, I don't know who set you up to be a judge over me.'

'It is my affection for you makes me bold, Mattie. I have seen, of course—I could not help seeing—that Mr. Clifford and you were very intimate friends, but I never dreamt

you could be anything more. Mattie—dear Mattie, pray give him up, and tell him never to come here again. Mr. Levison is very angry about it. He called him a "low cad," and said his eyes were opened at last. There will be a dreadful quarrel some day if you are not more prudent, and then it may end in unhappiness for all of you. Do—*do* give him up!'

'Do you want him for yourself?' asks Mattie, with a sneer. It is so wonderful to hear Mattie sneer. Betha drops the hand she holds at once, and draws herself backwards.

'I am engaged to be married to Mr. Frere,' she answers proudly.

'Oh! and you consider that a sufficient guarantee, I suppose, for the circumspection of your conduct, whilst my marriage is not enough for mine—thank you, Betha. Well, I am evidently not respectable enough for your acquaintance, and therefore I had better

drop it. My actions are not likely to meet with your approval, and therefore it will be wiser to save your feelings and acquit your conscience by not coming here any more.'

'Do you mean to cast me off?' exclaims Betha.

'I don't see that our friendship conduces to our happiness,' replies Mrs. Levison, but the hand which trifles with her teaspoon shakes the while; 'you are not content with finding fault with my friends and my actions, but you must needs turn tale-bearer against me to my husband, and therefore I cannot believe that you care for me any longer!'

'Tale-bearer to your husband!' echoes Betha. 'You know it is not true, Mattie. You know I am the last person in the world to undertake so odious an office; but if you are angry because I did not tell a lie to screen your own, the sooner we part the better, because that is what I never *have*

done, and I never *will* do, for you or anyone!'

'And in the present state of my household, to have such a truth-telling friend as yourself about the premises is the last thing that I desire,' says Mattie.

'And if what you insinuate is the truth,' retorts the other girl, 'to be your friend is the last thing I desire myself. But oh, Mattie!' she continues, with a sudden impulse, as she throws herself at Mrs. Levison's feet, 'be advised by me, and give up all acquaintanceships but such as your husband approves. You are too young, dear, and far too pretty, to follow your own inclination in such matters with impunity. Surely Mr. Levison is the proper person to decide whom you shall and whom you shall *not* know!'

But Mattie pushes her away, and rises from her seat. The voice of a true-hearted woman friend has no chance against that of self-esteem and flattered vanity.

'Your entreaties come too late, Betha,' she says, coldly. 'You have got me into a precious scrape with my husband, and it will take all my ingenuity, without any aid from your propensity for candour, to get out of it again. I have always heard that the most dangerous thing a married woman can have about her house is a female friend, and now I know it.'

'And you won't give up Geoffrey Clifford?' says Betha, sadly.

'Certainly not—for you or anyone; and if Mr. Levison doesn't take care I'll play him such a trick some day as he shall not easily forget!' replies Mattie, as she moves nonchalantly into the next room.

Betha's pride will not permit her to follow nor make a second appeal to her friend's feelings. She leaves the house without bidding her farewell, and with a resolve never to enter it again until she has very good reason to believe her presence is required.

The girl keeps her troubles to herself (she has been learning to do so during the last year), and only wonders sometimes sadly whether the pleasant days she has enjoyed with Mattie Levison are really at an end, and she shall never see her nor Geoffrey Clifford more.

She is startled, therefore, a few weeks later, by learning the reason of Mr. Henderson coming into the room, rubbing his hands, and with an unusually beaming countenance.

'Why what's the matter, papa?' she says.

Since Mrs. Henderson invariably addresses her husband, who has never been a 'papa,' by this endearing title, Betha has fallen into the habit of using it also.

'"What's the matter, papa?"' repeats Mr. Henderson, jocosely. 'Why, a great deal's the matter, my dear; that is to say, I have at last succeeded in doing what I have been trying for the last three years, and if you don't call that "something," *I* do.'

'But what is it?'

'I've nailed Geoffrey Clifford for an engagement at the Marlborough, and now the people of London shall see the handsomest Romeo and Juliet that they've looked at for a long time.'

'Mr. Clifford at the Marlborough!' says Betha, with confusion.

She is not sorry he is coming; she admires him greatly; she is proud of the prospect of acting with him; but what will he say about her quarrel with Mattie Levison? Will he refuse to shake hands with her, or believe her friend's statement that she is a talebearer and mischief-maker. This doubt troubles Betha terribly until the very moment she encounters Mr. Clifford again, when the ready smile with which he recognises her restores her courage.

'Then you are not hopelessly angry with me,' she whispers to him, as they stand apart in the intervals of a rehearsal.

'Angry! for what?'

'My misunderstanding with Mrs. Levison. It really was a misunderstanding, Mr. Clifford. She says I repeated needless tales of her to her husband, but I hope you do not think so little of me as to believe it can be true. I only told the truth. I never meant to harm her for a moment—should I have been so cruel? But Mattie would not believe my excuses, and so we parted.'

Geoffrey Clifford is silent for a moment; then he says:

'Miss Selwyn, if I thought that any consideration for *me* had influenced you in that matter I should owe you my very deepest thanks. You behaved like a true, good friend, both to her and to myself. Mrs. Levison is very lovely, as you know, and rather imprudent; and I, like most men of my age, am not *always* so careful as I ought to be; but I was a fool not to see the risk she ran in going about with me alone, until

your visit opened my eyes. She related to me what had occurred, and I perfectly acquiesced in all you said, and am happy to tell you that nothing worse than a domestic quarrel took place on the occasion, and that she will never be subjected to undergo such a trial again on my account.'

'Have you left off going to Queen's Gate, then?' asks Betha, inadvertently.

There is a little pause before he answers.

'Yes; at least, I go there very seldom, and only when invited by Mr. Levison himself.'

'I am so glad!' cries Betha, in her innocence.

'Miss Selwyn,' says her companion, gravely, 'I sincerely trust you never imagined I had any feeling for your friend beyond that of a mere acquaintance.'

Then Betha grows confused. She has thought so, beyond all doubt, but she cannot acknowledge it in the face of his denial.

'I am very glad you have not,' she replies, with greater fervour than is necessary.

'You cannot be more glad than I am,' he says, regarding her beautiful face with the keenest interest. 'I could have borne anything better than your suspicion. It would have robbed my present engagement of all its charm.'

'How would it have affected that?'

'Cannot you guess, Miss Selwyn, *why* I have come to the Marlborough? I have been asked to do so again and again during the last few years, but there was no attraction here sufficiently powerful to make me fall in with the manager's views. It was the prospect alone of supporting *you* that made me accept Henderson's offer now.'

'Oh, Mr. Clifford! was it really?' says Betha, blushing with pleasure.

'Can you doubt it? Have our long talks, then, on our art and the delight of cultivating it led you to no better conclusion? You

have heard me say that my soul lies in my profession—that to succeed there is the only end and aim of my existence. Do you suppose I could find a greater or more subtle pleasure than to walk hand in hand with one who cherishes the same aspirations, the same ambition as myself, and who will urge me on by example and precept to attain the highest heights of which my nature is capable.'

'No, no! It is I who must learn of you,' replies Betha, eagerly. 'Think how much more experienced an actor you are than myself.'

'We will teach each other and inspire each other,' says Geoffrey Clifford; 'and we will, if you please, drop the subject of Mrs. Levison from this time forward. She is a very lovely young woman, but she is not very sensible; and I, for one, do not consider the loss of her friendship in the light of a misfortune.'

'Mattie is not clever, but she was always very sweet to me—until this unfortunate business occurred,' says Betha.

'She has proved her utter folly, in being incapable of appreciating your worth,' replies Geoffrey Clifford.

And at this juncture the exigencies of the stage demand the cessation of their conversation.

Betha goes home from that rehearsal in a wonderful state of content. She is not only delighted to find that no real danger is likely to accrue from the imprudence of her poor friend Mattie Levison, and that Mr. Clifford does not seem to care for her a bit more than he ought to do; but her girlish heart is elated by the praise which he has bestowed upon her own acting, and the prospect he has held out of their working together to attain the highest paths of the profession to which the are mutually devoted. She bursts into the Hendersons' little parlour with her head

and heart aglow with hope and ambition; and feels as if a bucket of cold water had suddenly been thrown on her ardour when some one comes forward eagerly to give her greeting, and she finds her hand grasped in that of Bobby Frere.

CHAPTER VIII.

'WHAT DO YOU MEAN?'

They have been parted now for four whole months; yet Betha's first feeling in meeting him again is one of dire disappointment. Rob has not been allowed to visit town this season, his father and Lady Frere, in hope of weaning him from his 'unfortunate attachment for a common actress,' have carried him off to Scotland instead, and Betha has been in the habit of receiving a weekly epistle from her *fiancée*, clandestinely posted, and filled with lamentations over his inability to change the decrees of destiny.

I am afraid, for her part, the 'inability' has

secretly delighted her. Decidedly, her most prominent feeling at leaving Buton was relief to think she should no longer be subjected to Bobby's wearisome wooing; and now that he has made so sudden a reappearance, all her old objections return in full force. She has almost flattered herself, during these four months of liberty, that something will intervene to prevent their ever meeting again; and the sight of his ungainly figure and shy, awkward gait inspire her with repulsion.

'Oh!' she ejaculates with an uncomplimentary start, 'what a surprise you have given me! Why didn't you write to say you were coming? I thought you were hundreds of miles away.'

'And you don't seem very pleased to see me, now I am here,' says Bobby, ruefully.

'Oh yes! I am—of course I am—why shouldn't I be? Only you startled me so, and I am very tired. I have been standing for the last three hours at a rehearsal.'

'Sit down,' says Bobby, pushing a chair towards her.

'And what brings you to London?' asks Betha, as she takes it.

'What brings me to London, Betha? Why, to see you. What else should bring me here? I have been wretched all the summer at Kinross, longing to cut the whole business, and get back to you; but I couldn't manage it, so I had to submit. But as soon as we returned to Baron's Court, I got a letter which has given me all I want.'

'A letter, Rob!'

'Yes, my darling! I had written some time before, you know, to a friend, to use his interest for me, and he did it so well, that I have got an appointment in the city, and I am going to live in London for good and all.'

'An appointment in the city!' repeats Betha, vaguely.

To hear that Bobby has returned to her

side 'for good and all,' is startling news enough; but what should he (who has as much pocket-money as he can possibly desire) want with an appointment in the city?

'It's quite true, darling. Messrs. Mackinnon, of Leadenhall Street, have given me a situation as clerk in their firm, at one hundred and twenty pounds a year, and I shall never part with you again, Betha—never so long as I live.'

'But, Rob—what can you want with a hundred and twenty pounds a year?' says Betha, quickly. 'You—who have always had as much money from your father as you could require, without working for it at all? Surely you have enough new coats and trousers and ties to satisfy even your ambition! Blanche Chapman and I used to say that you were the most extensively got-up young man of our acquaintance.'

'But do you suppose I want nothing more than coats and trousers and ties, Betha!'

says Bobby, reproachfully. 'My father has been liberal enough hitherto, I allow; but he would soon stop my allowance if he knew I was spending any part of it upon a wife. And that is what I am going to work and strive for, Betha.'

She moves her chair a little further from him. She seems to be afraid of what this melting mood may result in.

'But that is nonsense, Rob! You will not be able to marry for years and years to come. You had much better have waited till your own money came to you in its proper time.'

'Do you think so, Betha? Don't say it. Plenty of young people begin life on no more than one hundred and twenty pounds a year; and I am sure we could make it do, if we tried. And I will help you, dear, and work as hard as ever I can, in order to increase our income.'

'Rob! What *do* you mean?'

'I mean that I want you to marry me!

You promised to do so, you know! You promised that when I had enough to support you on, you would leave the stage, and be my wife. Now didn't you?'

Leave the stage, and be his wife! Give up her profession, just as her ardent study is about to bring forth fruit! Quit the boards! Quit the comrades she loves so well! Quit —Geoffrey Clifford! No, Betha feels it is impossible! Art claims her, and she will be wedded to no one else.

'But we cannot! What would Lady Frere and Sir Willoughby say?' she exclaims.

'I shall not ask them,' replies Rob, indignantly. 'I have carved out my own path now, and mean to stick to it! For what else do you suppose that I have accepted a clerkship, except to be near you and have the right to protect you. Betha dearest! do not say I have had all my trouble in vain.'

By this time the girl has recovered herself.

'Oh no, Rob! we shall be together, as you say, and be able to see each other very often! And it was very good of you to take it—very good—and all for my sake, too!'

'And you will not leave the stage then, and marry me? You *promised* to do so, remember!'

The girl's breath comes quick and gasping.

'*Did* I promise? Yes, yes! I remember I did, but I did not think then it could possibly be until your grandmother's death! And now—how is it to be managed? Who could live on a hundred and twenty pounds a year! And you would not wish me to leave the stage, Rob! Not now—when I have just began to make a name for myself!'

'You shall not be on it a single day after you are my wife!' replies Bobby, gloomily.

'Who is talking about my wife!' says Mr. Henderson, entering the room. 'She's calling you, Miss Selwyn—I heard her just now.'

'I will go to her directly. This is a friend of mine, Mr. Henderson—Mr. Frere. He has just come up to town, and called to see me.'

'Humph!' says Mr. Henderson, who does not approve of his pupils receiving visits from gentlemen. 'Glad to see you, sir! Well, I'll go and look after the old woman, Betha, and you can follow me when you have done entertaining Mr. Frere.'

As soon as the stage-manager has disappeared, Betha turns to her companion, her eyes sparkling with glee.

'Rob, you forgot one thing! I am apprenticed to Mr. Henderson for the next three years! I cannot leave the stage without his permission. I am not sure if I could marry without his consent.'

'You don't mean to tell me that!' cries poor Bobby; and he couples the observation with an epithet that is more strong than polite in its reference to the absent manager.

'I won't have you talk of Mr. Henderson in that way,' says Betha, indignantly. 'He has been kindness itself to me, and so has his wife, and I love and respect them more than any friends I have in the world. Where should I have been now if they had not taken me up? A wretched drudging teacher most likely, in some second-rate school! Rob, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!'

'I wish you were a "wretched teacher," as you call it, Betha, and then you would be more ready, perhaps, to accept the offer I make you.'

'Do you mean to say that you have no ambition for me nor yourself,' exclaims the girl, 'that you would rather I were a nobody without brains, than Elizabeth Selwyn of the Marlborough Theatre? You should see the houses I draw nightly, and read the criticisms on my acting. But I don't believe you ever look at the newspapers, Rob!'

'Yes, I do! and it drives me wild to see

the way in which they presume to comment on your face, and your dress, and your acting! And then to think of the fellows who play with you—dangling about, and touching your hand and your waist! You don't know what it is, Betha, for anyone who loves you as I do, to think of such things as these.'

'Poor Rob!' the girl says softly—but she speaks with a pitying smile. Her heart is filled with the ambition to succeed—her head ringing with the flattery of honeyed words. She cannot realise what her stage triumphs look like to the man who has given up all the luxuries of his home, to drudge on a three-legged stool for her sake. 'You must come to-night and see me play Juliet,' she continues, coaxingly. 'You will alter your opinion then, and be as glad as I am of my success.'

But the event does not justify her words. Bobby does go to the play as she proposes, and gazes at first with unmitigated delight

on the apparition of beauty which Betha presents to him, clad in white satin and pearls, and decked in the modesty of her genius as with a garment.

But from the moment that the handsome Geoffrey Clifford—a typical Romeo—steps upon the stage, and proceeds to make violent love to Juliet, Bobby spends two long-drawn-out hours of agonising jealousy, which make him thirst for revenge on the hapless hero of the piece. He will not wait to see Betha afterwards, but rushes home to his humble lodgings, half crazy with pain and disappointment, and wondering (for the first time) if he has been rash in opposing the wishes of his father and grandmother, and insisting upon carving out a path in life with his own hands. His unaccustomed labour appears twice as hard and distasteful to him on the following morning, with no bright hope that Betha will soon be his own, to help him on his way. But still she is his—so the boy

argues—she has never denied his claim upon her, and she is too good and honourable to break her plighted word. So that when her apprenticeship with Mr. Henderson is ended —there are but two more years of it to run— he may confidently expect that she will become his wife. And meanwhile he will work for her—work hard and courageously that he may have a more suitable home to offer her, when the times comes, in exchange for the brilliant life she will resign for his sake. And so the brave heart of Robert Frere—braver and more faithful than Betha in her innocence of love has any idea of—settles itself down to an existence so different from what he has been accustomed to, and so uncongenial to his feelings, that the strength of his attachment to her could alone give him the patience to persevere.

Every now and then he meets her; sometimes (not often) he visits the theatre, and sometimes he takes her out for a walk; and

she still considers herself his betrothed, and is as innocently gay with him, and as free from anything like passion, as she was on the first day of their acquaintance.

But she has no idea of the depth of his feelings for her, no notion of the sacrifice he has made for her sake, no glimpse of what he suffers or regrets: Bobby is too generous to let her see it. She thinks he is a very stupid boy to prefer working in a city office to living down at Baron's Court with his horses, and dogs, and gamekeepers: and all for the sake of seeing her occasionally.

How can he be so silly? she asks him sometimes, with a merry laugh; why doesn't he go home again and visit his father and grandmother, and bring her back a hamper full of the lovely flowers in which she so much delights?

And Bobby smiles and shakes his head, and gazes at her with all his soul in his soft brown eyes, as he declares that he would not

leave the place that contains her, for all the pleasures she alludes to, repeated a thousand-fold. But he never tells her what is the truth—that in resolving to follow her and win her—he has resigned the luxuries of Baron's Court, and all the possible good that might accrue to him from the favour of Lady Frere, for ever; and that he has no more the power to return to his home and his parents than she has.

CHAPTER IX.

'YOU KNOW THAT YOU ARE MINE.'

THERE is no doubt of the successful appearance made by Mr. Geoffrey Clifford at the Marlborough. He was admired and run after, whilst at the Frivolity, for his beauty and his tenor voice; but he appears never to have discovered his real strength until he supports Miss Sewlyn in a round of Shakespearian characters. As Romeo, Hamlet, Benedick, Bassanio, and Orlando, he takes the town by storm. Cleverer actors have trod the boards before him: he has a powerful rival at the very time in an old favourite personating the same heroes at another

theatre. But the favourite is old, and Clifford is young; the favourite has no beauty, and Clifford is handsome as a star; the favourite has contracted mannerisms, and become 'stagey,' and Clifford is fresh, if somewhat crude, and *looks* his part, though he may not be perfect in its personation. And so the crowd follows him. The women worship in his train, and the pit and gallery transform him to a demi-god.

His photographs sell faster than they can be struck off; young ladies carry them in their bosoms, and sleep with them under their pillows; old ladies spend half their incomes in private boxes that they may gaze at him from behind a curtain; and more bouquets and billets-doux are left at the stage-door for him in one night, than Betha receives in a week.

She rallies him often on the reception of these love-tokens, and he casts the flowers and letters to one side with an assumption of

indifference or contempt that greatly delights her. For these two have become fast friends—or what the girl at least considers to be so—and think themselves entitled in consequence to each other's confidence. Their intimacy provokes much jealousy amongst the other ladies of the Marlborough, who think it quite bad enough that Miss Selwyn —a nobody from Buton—should come to town to take all the leading parts out of their hands, without appropriating the best-looking fellow in the theatre into the bargain.

Geoffrey Clifford is quite as much adored within the four walls of the Marlborough as by the public, and since he is on familiar terms with no one of the company except Betha, that young lady is compelled to listen to a great deal of talk that goes on in the dressing-room regarding him, and is raised simply with the view to her annoyance.

Miss Fanny Price, a pretty girl who plays in the farce, and has wasted a great deal of

her time and a great many of her smiles on Mr. Clifford without effect, is more bitter against him than the rest, and never loses an opportunity of saying something spiteful in Betha's presence.

'La! the fuss people make about that fellow!' she exclaims on one occasion, 'is perfectly sickening. *I* can't see his good looks! His features are "dolly," to my mind. But some girls will run after anything. Montgomery Warren was twice as good an actor as Clifford, but there were only twenty-five pounds in the house on his benefit night, and Clifford last week had seventy! And then they talk about worshipping Art! Rubbish! it's his pretty face they come to see—not his talent.'

'But Mr. Clifford *has* talent,' retorts Betha, in defence of her absent friend; 'Mr. Henderson says he is "the coming man," and there is no doubt of his power to "draw."'

'Ah, my dear! Henderson will say anything if there's money to be made out of it. He is famed for setting up golden calves for the public to fall down and worship. Clifford has got money at his back somewhere—there's no doubt about that.'

'Money at his back!' says Betha with open eyes.

'Of course! Some old dowager, most likely, who is smitten by his handsome face, and pays Henderson a good round sum to keep him here, where she can come and look at him without restraint. Haven't you seen the old woman in a wig who occupies the royal box almost every night? That is she, most likely; and now I come to think of it, Clifford generally bows in her direction. You look out for her this evening. She is sure to be there.'

'Mr. Clifford would not be so mean and contemptible as to owe his success to anything but his own merit,' cries Betha, indignantly.

'What should he want with anybody's money? He can make enough for himself.'

'Well, you needn't get so warm over it,' exclaims Miss Fanny; 'it is no concern of yours, anyway. But you'll never tell me you're such an innocent as not to have heard of such things. How do you suppose half the people get on the stage nowadays, except through interest. We'd all be taking the lead if it wasn't for that.'

'*I* had no interest,' says Betha, with flaming cheeks.

'Hadn't you, my dear? Well, you're quite right to keep the secret if you had. Anyway, you may take your oath Clifford didn't walk on the stage of his own accord. I believe he's married to that old dowager with the wig. I've seen him driving with her in the Park. And Geoffrey Clifford isn't his own name, that I know.'

'That is more than probable,' says Betha.

'Selwyn is not my name either. Some people have friends and relations who object to their using their own names; and no one can speak to Mr. Clifford without seeing that he comes of a good family. Every word and gesture shows that he is a gentleman.'

'Dear me! I haven't been in the habit of observing his words and gestures so closely as all that, but I dare say you are right. So am I about the dowager. Wait a bit and you'll find it out for yourself.'

Betha despises herself for attaching any importance to the words of a silly girl like Fanny Price, but they rankle in her mind nevertheless. She could not bear, so she thinks, to see her friend Geoffrey Clifford lowered in her esteem. She does not believe the tales she has heard concerning him, and yet she catches herself looking out for the old lady in the wig, and wondering, each time Mr. Clifford leaves the stage, whether

he has gone round to her box, and if it can possibly be true that he accepts the patronage of anyone. The Shakespearian drama is relieved after a while by plays of a lighter character, preceded and followed by a farce. One night, as the curtain falls upon 'Money,' and the stage is cleared for 'Lend Me Five Shillings,' Fanny Price meets Betha at the wings.

'Well, my dear, and what do you think of your Sir Galahad now?' she says.

'I don't know who you mean,' replies Betha, coldly.

'Oh yes, you do. I mean Geoffrey Clifford. Look at the dowager's box when the "rag" goes up again, and you'll believe what I told you. He went straight round to it, and is sitting behind the curtain with her now.'

'It is nothing to me with whom Mr. Clifford chooses to sit,' retorts Betha, 'nor who are his friends. I wish you would not talk such nonsense, Fanny.'

Yet, if it is nothing to her, it is strange that she should take the trouble, whilst the farce is on, to stand at the wings and scrutinise the house, until she lights upon the object of her search.

There he is, sure enough, half concealed behind the curtain of the dowager's box.

Betha cannot see his face, but she knows him by his well-shaped hand; by a habit he has contracted of impatiently jerking his knees whilst engaged in conversation, and by the furtive glimpse she catches of the back of his close-shorn head. She recognises each trifling proof of the presence of her friend, yet cannot recognise the reason of her perspicuity. She gazes at the curtain which conceals him for a few moments in silence, and then, convinced that Miss Fanny Price has spoken the truth at least in one particular, Betha turns quietly away to the dressing-room, and having changed her attire, returns home.

The little house seems empty. Mr. Henderson is still busy at the theatre; his wife has retired to bed, and the sleepy maid-servant who sits up to let Betha in, disappears almost simultaneously to her own sleeping apartment.

The girl feels utterly alone to-night. She enters the room where supper is laid ready for her, and having divested herself of her outdoor garments, sits down languidly by the table, resting her head upon her hand. Her heart is weighted with a heavy load, though she hardly knows why; she cannot shake off the oppression that burdens her; she feels as if some dreadful calamity had suddenly overshadowed her young life.

At last the solitude and the disappointment and the doubts produce their effect upon her, and she bursts into a flood of tears. A moment later Betha is reproaching herself for such an act of weakness, but the traces of her emotion are still plainly visible when a

knock sounds upon the front door. She brushes her tears hastily away as she rises to answer it. She supposes it to be Mr. Henderson, who may have forgotten his latch-key; but on the threshold of the opened door, to her surprise, stands Geoffrey Clifford.

'Miss Selwyn, I am sorry to trouble you, but you have my part for to-morrow's rehearsal in your pocket. You put it away for me after the second act.'

'Yes, I remember it well. How silly of me to forget to leave it for you at the stage-door!' replies Betha, as she turns into the sitting-room and produces the manuscript from a pocket in her cloak.

Geoffrey Clifford takes the paper from her, but does not release the hand that proffered it.

'What have you been crying for?' he asks abruptly, as he sees her clear grey eyes glistening in the gaslight.

'Nothing! I was silly—over-tired,' she answers. 'The tongues in that dressing-room never cease. It's enough to weary anyone to listen to them.'

'I can quite imagine that,' he says, laughing; 'but hardly that they possessed sufficient power, in themselves, to upset my strong-minded little friend. They might have made you impatient and angry, but not moved you to tears! No, Betha! it is something more than that. Now, what is it?'

His manner is somewhat dictatorial, and her first impulse is to deny the charge, and his right to make it. But the next moment her heart questions why she should conceal her interest in him as a friend, and prevent his refutation of the charges brought against him. So she recovers her hand from his grasp, but looks him honestly in the face as she replies:

'I don't think I *should* have been so foolish

as to cry if I had not been rather tired; but it really was Fanny Price's nonsense that upset me. She will insist, Mr. Clifford, that you only hold your present position in the Marlborough because you have money (as she calls it), *at your back;*' and that the lady in whose box you were sitting to-night has paid Mr. Henderson a "*good round sum*" in order to keep you there. And it is so derogatory to art and your talent—and—and—everything,' continues Betha, faltering, and conscious that she has not got very cleverly out of her scrape; 'and the last thing one would like to think of a friend, and so—so——'

'So this kind little girl felt the implied degradation for me, and honoured it with her tears,' says Mr. Clifford, repossessing himself of Betha's hand. 'Thank you, Betha, a thousand times! And now, how am I to exculpate myself from such a charge? Which accusation shall I answer first?'

'Oh, there is no need! Why should you answer them—and to me?' says Betha, blushing violently. 'I don't believe anything against you, Mr. Clifford—nor ever shall!'

She has sat down by this time, and he has taken another chair close by her side.

'But I think I owe it to myself to give you some explanation. They say there is never smoke without fire; and though Miss Price's tittle-tattle is not strictly true, it has a certain foundation.'

Betha starts.

'Don't look so scared!' says Clifford, smiling. 'No lady—old or young—has paid Mr. Henderson any money on my account; but I think you can scarcely have associated with me for so long, Betha, without finding out that I am not quite what I appear to be.'

'Of course I know you are a gentleman,' she murmurs. 'Anyone could see that.'

'I hope so! Yes, it is true, I am a man

of birth, and I have an income into the bargain; not very large, but still sufficient to prevent my depending entirely on my profession for support. That accounts for the money scandal, Betha! As for the old lady in whose box I sat for half-an-hour this evening, I cannot tell you much about her except that she is between sixty and seventy, and a relation of mine who is weak enough to take an interest in seeing me play the fool in public.'

'Fanny declared you were married to her!' says Betha, smiling through her tears.

Geoffrey Clifford starts; and then with a forced laugh recovers himself.

'It is untrue!' he says, shortly. 'Is that sufficient for you, Betha?'

'Of course I didn't believe it!' replies the girl, in a low voice.

'And yet—you cried!'

'Yes—yes!' with much confusion, 'because—oh, can't you understand!—it seemed so

degrading to art; and we have been such friends, I thought you would have told me—and—and——'

'And—and——' he says, mimicking her—'and—Betha Selwyn could not bear to think that Geoffrey Clifford liked anybody better than herself?'

Betha is silent.

'Betha, do you like me *very* much?'

She will not answer, and there is a pause.

Oh, these dangerous pauses! Before this one is concluded, an arm steals softly round her lissom waist.

'Mr. Clifford! pray don't! Indeed you mustn't!'

'My darling!' he whispers, 'you know you are mine!'

She is about to remonstrate with him, when Mr. Henderson's latch-key is heard in the door, and they have only time to draw their chairs apart before the manager enters the room.

'Hullo!' he exclaims, shading his eyes from the glare of the gas, '*you* here, my boy? Why, it is nearly one o'clock! I thought I should find the house shut up; and little Selwyn here in bed, and fast asleep!'

'Is it so late as that?' cries Betha, rising and in confusion; 'I had no idea of it, papa! I will say good-night to you, and go at once.'

'But you haven't touched your supper, child!'

'Never mind! I do not wish for any. Good-night, Mr. Clifford; good-night, papa;' and without glancing at either of them, Betha darts up to her own room.

'And what may your business be?' says Mr. Henderson, looking suspiciously at Geoffrey Clifford.

'I came in to speak to you, sir,' is the ready falsehood. 'I don't quite understand what I am expected to do to-morrow.'

'Don't you? I thought I put it plain

enough ; and the calls were posted this afternoon. Full rehearsal of "A Hundred Thousand Pounds" at ten, and the second act of "Lady of Lyons" at four, for the benefit of the new "Widow Melnotte." Now, do you understand ?'

'Yes, thanks, perfectly ! And so I will wish you good-night, Mr. Henderson.'

'Good-night, my boy !' says the manager, stoutly.

He accompanies his visitor to the hall-door, and sees him over the threshold ; but before he turns his back, he speaks again :

'Look here, Clifford ! One word with you, my boy ! Always glad to see you here, you know, and all that sort of thing; but don't you get playing the fool with Betha Selwyn, because she's under my charge, and I can't allow it.'

'Do you suppose I should do such a thing ?' replies Geoffrey Clifford awkwardly, as he walks down the street.

* * * * *

Meanwhile Betha, still undressed, is lying on her bed, face downwards, with a vast new feeling pervading her breast.

Geoffrey Clifford's words, his looks, his touch (the closest touch he has ever given her off the stage), have suddenly revealed to her the possibility of a new life, of an experience hitherto undreamed of, of a dual existence fused into one. Girls may read and talk and think of love, but until it comes (as a newborn child to their bosom) they have no real conception of what it feels like.

Betha has never realised it till this moment. But now she knows all. A single flash of mutual understanding between Geoffrey Clifford's eyes and her own has taught her the mighty secret of the world. She understands now why she has trembled in his embrace, although it was but a fictitious one; why she has longed, yet dreaded, that he should touch her face—why she has

writhed beneath remarks detrimental to his credit, and felt her blood run cold at the mere idea that his attentions were directed to another. *She loves him!*

All life seems suddenly to change beneath the knowledge. The air is full of singing birds: the world is bathed in one rich glow of morning glory: the breeze is laden with the perfume of sweet flowers. Doubt, despondency, and loneliness have fled away, and she is encircled by a rosy halo of hope, trust, and perfected ambition.

Betha ponders on the marvels which one little sentence has revealed to her, until she sheds happy tears of excitement and joy at the prospect of the future. To-morrow—to-morrow will rise as no day has ever risen for her yet, crowned with the love of Geoffrey Clifford and her own heart. At ten o'clock they will meet again—not as they have met before, but with a mutual understanding that can never be recalled.

As the girl thinks thus, and rises, with flushed cheeks and glistening eyes, to perform her toilet for the night, a letter on the dressing-table attracts her notice. It has arrived during her absence at the theatre, and been placed there by the servant. She turns it over carelessly, though with fingers that still tremble. The address is in the handwriting of her betrothed husband, Robert Frere!

Betha drops the letter as though it had the power to sting her, and sitting down upon the bed again, covers her face with her hands, and trembles as though smitten by the ague.

CHAPTER X.

'I AM ENGAGED TO BE MARRIED.'

The night that follows is a miserable one. A thousand times does the unhappy girl try to convince herself that she is not really bound to marry Robert Frere, and that it would be a cruel thing of him to take advantage of a promise wrested from her at a period when she had no idea of the solemnity of the pledge she gave. But no reasoning can do away with the fatal truth—he has her plighted word, and she must not break it.

When Betha has once convinced herself of her responsibility, she rises to the occasion

like a true heroine. Every action of her life hitherto has proved her to be a strong-minded girl, and her noble nature does not fail her now. She thinks long and earnestly of her mother—her dear dead mother, whom she loved so fondly, and who suffered so much—and tries to realise what her counsel would be in the present emergency. How would she advise her to act?

Betha knows more of her mother's heart-history now than she did at the moment of her death. Her own experience of the troubles of life has opened her eyes to the sorrows of the dead. No one has spoken further to her on the subject; in what shape the trouble came (excepting that it was connected with Mrs. Wallerton) is still rather doubtful to her, but of the fact that her mother's heart was broken and her father's infidelity had something to do with it, Betha is quite assured. And shall she follow in his footsteps and be unfaithful too? Shall

she cause her mother, looking down upon her, perhaps, at that very moment, to blush for the child she brought into the world, and feel she is more her husband's daughter than her own?

No! Betha waxes strong and resolute in the determination that it shall not be. It costs her many tears to arrive at this conclusion; the prospect of a life spent with Robert Frere appears more distasteful than it has ever done before; but if to fulfil the promise she has made him proves too difficult a task for her, she will at least not break it for the sake of another man.

By the time the morning dawns she has made up her mind what is the right thing to do, and resolved that the first sentence of love Mr. Clifford has dared to breathe into her ears shall be the last. She even sits down before she leaves her chamber, and with a trembling hand writes a kind little note to Bobby, telling him she has received his

letter, and making an appointment to walk with him upon the following day. And then she descends to breakfast, with the feelings of a martyr led out to execution, but determined at all costs to do the right, and stick to it.

Mr. and Mrs. Henderson both remark her pallor and demand the cause, but get little satisfaction for their pains. Betha talks and laughs as usual, is as attentive to their little wants as ever, and trips off to rehearsal without a single hint that she has spent half the night in tears.

Geoffrey Clifford (usually noted for his unpunctuality) is on the stage when she arrives, and evidently looking out for her. Betha gives him a passive hand for greeting, and without raising her eyes to his, passes to her own place.

It is a first rehearsal, and, consequently, rather an irregular one. The actors are simply reading their parts and taking up

their positions, and Mr. Clifford has a dozen opportunities of meeting Betha at the wings, or following her about the stage. But she will not speak to him except in monosyllables. She is always busily employed upon her book. At last he gets impatient and somewhat angry.

'What is the matter, Betha? Are you offended with me? You have not spoken ten words this morning.'

'I am so busy, Mr. Clifford; I have no time for talking. I do not know a line of this part.'

'Hang the part! You know you are so quick at study that it will not take you an hour to be "word-perfect."'

'Is there any reason I should not study it now?'

'Yes; an unanswerable reason. I want to talk to you. Our conversation was cut short last night by that old bore Henderson.

Can't you imagine how eager I am to finish it?'

'That conversation had better never have been begun, Mr. Clifford,' says the girl, gravely, 'and I am sure it had better never be finished.'

'What do you mean?'

'That I was wrong to let you say so much, and that it must never be again. Pray forget that I listened to such words from you,' replies Betha, with a face of crimson.

'That is impossible!' exclaims the young man, impetuously; 'I read my answer in your eyes last night, and I shall not be satisfied till I have heard it from your lips.'

He is about to say more, when the managerial voice orders him loudly to attend to business, and he is compelled to leave her and go through the scene. Whilst he is absent Betha cogitates earnestly with her heart what to say to him next; and when he

rejoins her, she is brave enough to renew the subject of her own accord.

'Mr. Clifford!' she commences, with lips that try hard not to tremble, 'I must speak to you seriously on this subject. 'I ought to have told you long ago, what would have prevented your speaking to me as you did last night—I am engaged to be married!'

She expects that he will be terribly taken aback by this news, but although he looks surprised and annoyed, Geoffrey Clifford bears the shock uncommonly well.

'Who to?' he asks abruptly.

'To Mr. Frere. I have been engaged to him for some months past, and unless he releases me from my promise of his own accord, I can never marry another man—nor must I allow anyone to speak to me, as—as—*you* spoke to me yesterday evening!'

'Is this Mr. Frere such a terrible ogre, then?'

The careless question shocks her delicacy,

and should have opened her eyes to the nature of the man who addresses her. But where a passionate love has blinded the vision, even vices become transformed to virtues. The words stagger Betha, but they do not disenchant her.

'Oh no!—just the contrary—he is very kind and good to me!' she stammers; 'but—don't you see I cannot—I *must* not—it would be so wrong, so dishonourable of me to say or do anything behind his back which I would not do before his face.'

'Of course! You are perfectly right, and I understand all you would wish me to do! But, Betha, this engagement (or whatever you may call it) is not to prevent you having a friend, is it?'

'Oh no.'

'You are not going to cast me off because you have found somebody better, eh?'

'I didn't say he was better—only—he has my promise!'

'Just so! and I think you promised once also to be my friend.'

'And I *am* your friend, Geoffrey—I mean Mr. Clifford—you know I am.'

'I hope so! But why not "Geoffrey"? Is that one of the words of which this terrible Mr. Frere would not approve?'

'I don't know! I have not asked him,' replies Betha, timidly; 'only—I think it will be better I should not call you so.'

'Does it sound too dangerous! Do you feel as if it would bring us too closely together?'

The girl cannot answer him. Her eyes are swimming in tears, and there is a choking sensation in her throat.

'*My darling!*' says Geoffrey Clifford for the second time, in a bold impassioned whisper, as he stoops over her. 'Not all the Mr. Freres in the world shall prevent my calling you that! *I* have your heart—you cannot deny it—let who will claim the promise of your hand!'

CHAPTER XI.

'I DECLINE TO ANSWER.'

After this second declaration on the part of Geoffrey Clifford, a regular warfare commences between him and Betha Durant, which threatens to undermine their friendship and leave her sitting on the ruins alone. All her efforts are to avoid him, except upon the stage; all his, to pursue and speak to her. He refuses to restrain himself from addressing her in terms which she considers derogatory to her dignity, and the girl, conscious of her own feelings regarding him, is so fearful of betrayal, that she becomes nervous if they are left together for five minutes at the wings.

Anxious also to render her sacrifice and her loyalty as complete as possible, she takes, at this juncture, almost to courting Bobby Frere, a proceeding which sends that honest young fellow 'off his head,' and causes the warmth of his wooing so materially to increase, that Betha shrinks back in alarm and reproaches herself more than ever for the double duplicity of which she is guilty. The poor child's heart is torn in pieces between her love and what she thinks her duty!

To permit Bobby Frere to touch her lips and hold her hands, when her whole soul is at the feet of Geoffrey Clifford appears a sacrilege; and yet to let Clifford gaze into her eyes as though he would penetrate her very being, whilst she is betrothed to Mr. Frere, lowers her in her own estimation, until she wishes never to see either of them again. She becomes almost a stranger in the theatre.

From having spent half her time upon the boards and in the green-room, she falls into

the habit of never appearing there except on business, which she executes as promptly as is possible. On spare afternoons she takes long and formal walks with Robert Frere, or invites him to spend the hours with her in Mrs. Henderson's little parlour, where they sit opposite to one another in the most decorous manner, discussing the ordinary topics of the day, and where (as Bobby has found to his cost) if he attempts to put a lesser distance between himself and the lady of his love, Betha is apt to fly from him altogether, and shut herself up in the recesses of her own chamber. And yet if he takes his leave (as he mostly does) with a look and air of dire disappointment at the coolness of her behaviour, the poor child has a fit of crying as soon as he is out of sight, and calls herself by every harsh name she can think of, for finding it so impossible to love him.

And then she will prepare for the theatre, with a heart burning at the mere thought of

meeting Geoffrey Clifford, and ready to stand still at the first glimpse of his countenance or sound of his voice. As may be imagined, this continual internal warfare is the very worst thing for an excitable and emotional girl like Betha Durant. Her mental struggles soon produce an effect upon her physical constitution, and she becomes pale and thin and nervous.

It is now autumn: the season is past and over: all the fashionables are out of town: but the Marlborough still keeps its doors open, and the house is crowded nightly. There is no prospect of getting a holiday, and Betha has settled herself down to a very dull routine of work, when one morning, as she is sitting quietly at home, she is much startled by receiving the card of Mrs. Levison, and being told that she is waiting downstairs to see her.

'The lady wants to speak with you, very particular indeed, miss,' is the servant's

addendum to the news, 'and if you're busy now, she'll wait until you've done!'

Betha does not hesitate a moment as to what she shall do. She has always been fond of Mattie, and bears no malice in her honest heart. She thinks that her friend's presence there can hold but one meaning—a wish to make up the quarrel between them—and Betha is quite ready to forget and forgive. So she runs downstairs with all speed, and enters the room with a glowing face.

'I was sure that sooner or later you would come to see me again, Mattie!' she exclaims, as she advances with an out-stretched hand.

But Mrs. Levison does not meet her half-way. She is standing on the hearthrug, dressed in the most extravagant costume of velvet and sable, her lovely face shaded by a ruby-coloured hat, and a drooping plume of feathers.

'I don't think you will consider my visit a pleasant one,' she answers coldly.

'What is the matter now?' cries Betha.

Mattie is not a clever woman; she has no idea of circumspection, nor of arriving at the truth by a circuitous route. So she rushes on to the attack at once.

'*The matter now!*' she repeats loudly. 'Oh, you false hypocritical girl! What did you say to me in my own house, the very last time we met there, when I asked you if you wanted to keep Mr. Clifford for yourself—that you *were engaged to Mr. Frere.* So very grand, indeed! Engaged to Mr. Frere! As if that made any difference to your conduct with the other man, though I suppose you thought you'd keep it dark. But I've heard all about it. You are talked of in connection with Mr. Clifford, far and near. I heard of you, even at Dieppe, where I have been spending the summer; and now that I come back to town, I find your names are in everybody's mouth. You

and Mr. Clifford, mind, not you and Mr. Frere! Oh, you wicked, false girl!'

During this coarse attack Betha has stood silent, though she has turned very pale. She knows that great liberties are often taken with the names of women of her profession — that wicked and untrue stories are bandied about concerning them, because they are considered the public property of any tongue that chooses to misinterpret their actions; but she has been so particular, so reticent in her own conduct, it has never fallen to her lot to be accused of any imprudence before. She has never thought it possible she could be so accused. And all the force of her nature rises to the surface at Mattie's words, and makes her rebel against their insolence and their injustice.

'How dare you speak to me like this!' she says determinately. 'By what right do you come here to insult me by the repetition of a falsehood?'

'But *is* it a falsehood? that is the question,' interposes Mrs. Levison, shrilly; 'I don't believe it, for one! You tried all you could to get him away from me—you did not wish me to have him even as a friend—and only because you were so anxious for my welfare! And yet, directly he comes to the Marlborough, you set up a flirtation with him yourself that makes you the talk of the town. What have you to say to that?'

'Nothing, Mattie! In the first place I owe no explanation to you of anything I may choose either to do or say. You are not my judge, and Mr. Clifford is not your property. You and your friends may think what they like about me. Mine know that I have done nothing to incur their reproaches.'

'That is according to the light in which your friends may regard such scandalous proceedings,' says Mattie.

'There is no proceeding more scandalous

than for a married woman to receive a lover under her husband's roof,' retorts Betha. 'I have no doubt, because I troubled myself to remonstrate with you upon the matter, that you imagine I had something to do with Mr. Clifford giving up his intimacy with you. But it is not the case. He told me of his own accord that he never visited you now, excepting on the invitation of your husband.'

'Oh! Geoffrey told you so, did he!' exclaims Mrs. Levison. 'Well, then, it isn't true. He comes to see me frequently—whenever he has an opportunity, in fact—and we dined together *tête-à-tête* only last Sunday. You may make what you like of that.'

There are some women so vain and greedy of a reputation for making conquests, that they will destroy their own characters rather than incur the reproach of having lost their power to charm. And Mattie Levison, under

the baneful influence of a mercenary marriage, has come to this. It would be untrue to assert that Betha is not affected by her intelligence. She feels it keenly, but she will not show it. Her next words are delivered as calmly as before.

'You ought to be very much ashamed to acknowledge it, Mattie; but since it is so, I am at a loss to imagine why you have taken the trouble to come here and accuse me of what must (according to your own account) be untrue. If Mr. Clifford is still *your* friend and admirer, he can be in no danger from me.'

'I don't know that, Betha. Men are such fools, they will be taken in by anybody, and you are clever enough for a dozen women. But I'll expose you, as sure as my name is Mattie Levison. I will go to Mr. Frere and tell him the whole story. It will sound well for him to hear that his *fiancée* is carrying on, at every opportunity, with another man.'

Betha is now fairly roused.

'You may tell Mr. Frere what you choose,' she answers angrily. 'You cannot make any accusation against me that will not rebound upon yourself.'

'You do not deny, then, that you are in love with Geoffrey Clifford?'

The blood pours in a crimson wave over Betha's face and neck as she replies:

'I am answerable to no one but myself for anything I may do or say, and I decline to answer any questions on the subject.'

'Your face proves your guilt!' exclaims Mrs. Levison. 'It is shameful—disgusting—outrageous! Everything that I have heard is true, and you are a false-hearted friend and lover!'

'Mattie! I shall not stay here to receive any further insults at your hands. You had better go home—I never wish to meet you again.'

'You *cannot* deny that you are in love with

Geoffrey Clifford,' persists the other woman, stamping her foot.

'I neither deny nor admit it. You have no right to ask me such a question. And if we meet again, it must be in the presence of some one who can protect me from a repetition of the insolence you have displayed to-day.'

And so saying, with a dignified manner Betha passes from the room and returns to her own apartment. But she is very hard hit, notwithstanding the outward firmness of her demeanour.

To hear that her name has been coupled with that of Clifford is bad enough. To hear that, notwithstanding his assertions to the contrary, and his protestations of affection for herself, he is still visiting Mrs. Levison without the knowledge of her husband, is still worse. But as she sits down in solitude to think over these things Betha does not cry. There is a hard lump in her throat that

threatens to impede her utterance, and a heavy weight upon her bosom; but the feelings of pride and insulted womanhood are uppermost in her mind, and they are too powerful to permit her to weep. She goes through the day's duties with dry eyes, but a burning heart, and attends the theatre in the evening with a strong resolution not to exchange a word, except in business, with Geoffrey Clifford.

But he is as determined to speak to her, and if his will is not stronger than her own, opportunity shows him the most favour. The piece in which they appear together is, under the circumstances, a very trying one. It is a melodrama full of love-passages, which must be gone through, whatever the private feelings of the actors. Betha has dreaded them hitherto, because they revealed to her too plainly the depths of her own heart. Now she dreads them because she shrinks from the merest touch, however for-

mal, of Geoffrey Clifford's hand. He sees her disinclination, and resolves to know the cause. He will learn why her eyes refuse to meet his own; why her hand lies limp and cold in his grasp; why she will not lean against him even in the smallest degree, but disengages her figure from his clasp, and stands upright, even to the ruin of their best bits of 'business.'

Clifford is, or supposes himself to be, very much in love with this girl. She is so different from the women he has met hitherto—the soft, careless, unprincipled loungers in drawing-rooms, who are bent upon nothing but the gratification of their own vanity and the deception of their husbands. His handsome face has gained him many favours in his time from ladies of that ilk, but he has never felt such an ardent desire to obtain anything in this world as a genuine smile, a word of approval, from the lips of Betha Selwyn.

This girl with the honest eyes and the

frank fearless smile—with a soul full of genius and ardent aspirations, and a mind withal so innocent (or ignorant, whichever you will) of evil, that the most daring insinuations are so much Greek to her—Geoffrey Clifford would give all that he possesses to hear Betha say she loves him; and the more she avoids his presence, the more determined is he to effect her capture. Like most of his sex, opposition only renders him more eager; and on this particular night, perceiving that her greeting to him has been unusually quiet and discreet, he pounces upon her as soon as the piece is over, to insist upon a few moments' conversation.

CHAPTER XII.

'I CANNOT BE DISHONOURABLE!'

'MISS SELWYN!' he exclaims, 'I must speak to you.'

'It is impossible,' she answers, coldly; 'I am going to my dressing-room.'

'Surely you might give me a few moments in the green-room?' he urges.

'I cannot! I am tired—please let me pass,' says Betha.

'I have some business to consult you on, of a most important nature!'

'To-morrow morning, then, at Mr. Henderson's—I cannot stay to talk to you to-night,' and Betha walks past him to the ladies' quarter.

Clifford stands for a minute where she has left him, biting his lips with mortification. Then a sudden thought strikes him, and adjourning to his own apartment, he quickly changes his dress.

Half an hour afterwards, Betha slowly descends to the stage-door. The cab that nightly takes her backwards and forwards to the theatre is waiting for her. The driver knows her destination well—there is no need to give him any directions—and she mechanically takes her seat. Just as the vehicle is moving off, however, the handle of the door is turned, and some one jumps in beside her.

'All right!' he shouts to cabby, and away they rattle over the paved streets towards her home.

'Mr. Clifford!' she cries in astonishment, 'surely this is not you!'

'Surely it is, Betha, and no other! Now, it is no use scolding me. I *must* speak to you to-night, and I am resolved to do it.

You have made me miserable by your distant behaviour, and I have a right to know the cause.'

Women never like men the less for showing a certain amount of boldness and impudence in prosecuting their courtship. It implies a determination to succeed, and without determination a man is worse than a woman! Yet (though she does not rebuke him further for entering the cab), Betha answers Clifford very coldly:

'I deny your right to know anything that concerns me.'

'Is that the tone of friendship, Betha? How long is it since you promised to be my friend? Is that happy time quite forgotten?'

'You put an end to it yourself,' she says, with lips that tremble; 'and now, I have no wish to renew the sentiment. Friends should be true to one another, and that is what you have not been to me.'

'In what way? tell me the truth. You are too just, I am sure, to condemn a man unheard.'

'This morning,' she says, trying to speak indifferently, 'I had a visit from Mrs. Levison.'

'Indeed! Is she in London?'

Had Betha been looking in his face at that moment, she would have detected its change of colour, even by the passing flare of the gas-lamps; but her eyes are turned the other way, and his looks escape her notice.

'Yes! You *know* she is in London! You dined with her last Sunday,' she says, presently.

'Did I? Of course, now you mention it, I did; but Mrs. Levison's presence or absence is a matter of such perfect indifference to me (excepting that her chatter bores me to extinction), that it had really almost escaped my memory.'

'Oh, Mr. Clifford! why do you stoop to

such prevarication! You told me some time since that you never visited at Queen's Gate now except on the invitation of Mr. Levison, and yet Mattie says she sees you frequently —in fact, on every possible opportunity.'

The cab has stopped at Betha's home now, and he helps her to alight.

'Let me come in and try to exculpate myself,' he whispers, as she passes him into the house. The girl does not answer. She is longing to hear him say that Mattie has lied, although he can never be anything to herself. And Geoffrey Clifford takes her silence as consent.

'Mrs. Levison pounced upon me last Sunday at my chambers,' he says, as they enter the little parlour together, 'and would not leave them until I returned with her. She sat in her carriage at the door, and refused to stir until I went down to speak to her; and then she would take no denial, but insisted upon my getting in, then and there, and

driving back to Queen's Gate. What could I do? You don't know, Betha, how hard it is for a man, under such circumstances, to act for the best. We cannot be rude to a lady, and there is but one alternative—to do as she tells you!'

Betha looks horrified at the relation.

'And can Mattie have sunk so low!' she exclaims; 'oh, I never thought she could stoop to such an act of imprudence as that! To visit a gentleman at his chambers! She must *wish* to lose her reputation.'

'Remember, Betha, I have told you this in confidence. Even under the seal of secrecy I would have told it to no one but you, and then only to exonerate myself. But this does not explain your behaviour to me this evening! Surely, my having dined with Mrs. Levison (however imprudently) is not sufficient to entitle me to your anger.'

Betha's cheeks are dyed at the recollection.

'No, no! it is not that—but Mattie was

very angry: she did not visit me out of any kindly feeling, and she accused me of things of which I am entirely innocent; and—and—I can never speak to her again, Mr. Clifford—she insulted me too grossly.'

Clifford looks at the flaming cheeks and eyes, and guesses the reason of his friend's disturbance.

'She insulted you on *my* account,' he says, confidently.

'Who told you so?' exclaims Betha.

'Your eyes tell me so, my darling,' replies he; 'your coolness to me this evening, your anger against Mrs. Levison, all say the same thing. She accused you of taking me away from her—is it not so?—and you are annoyed at the imputation, and resolved to visit it on my unoffending head.'

'But it is not true!' cries Betha.

'It *is* true, my dearest! You *have* taken me away, most effectually, from every other woman in the world! I can think and dream

of no one but yourself. I am mad with love for you, Betha; you see it—know it—feel it, in every action of my life. I tremble when I approach you; I am wretched when I leave you; I have no happiness, no peace, except in your presence; and I am resolved to let no obstacle bar my way until I have won you for myself.'

He has thrown his arms about her, and Betha, with a heart welling over with love, may be forgiven, even by the most upright, if for a moment she forgets everything excepting that she is clasped in the embrace of the one man whom the world holds for her.

'Oh, Geoffrey!' she sighs; 'you must not. It is impossible! What might have happened if we had met before, I cannot say; but it is too late now! I have pledged my faith to another, and there is as great a barrier between us as if I were already married.'

'Nonsense, my darling! You exaggerate

your responsibilities! You seem to consider an engagement irrevocable! But even if it were so, what odds? Remain engaged to Mr. Frere, if it pleases you, until you find a fair excuse to break with him: but be my friend and lover all the same, and make me the happiest creature upon earth.'

'But that would be dishonourable,' says Betha, as she thinks of poor Rob bending with his short-sighted eyes over his office-work; 'besides which, Mr. Frere has given up so much for me. Oh no! I could never make up my mind to break with him. He considers our promise as binding as a marriage.'

'And so you will make me miserable for his sake!' exclaims Geoffrey Clifford.

'Oh! what *am* I to do? I cannot be dishonourable. My mother taught me that it is better to die of grief than do an action unworthy of myself. Mr. Clifford! be strong for both of us, and show me what is right to

do. You must know everything, and I am but a girl.'

'A girl who loves me,' cries Clifford, triumphantly. 'Can you deny it, Betha?'

'No—no! I will not deny my own heart. Geoffrey! I *do* love you.'

She flings herself into his arms with a passionate gesture for one moment, to withdraw herself with a low cry of remembrance the next.

'It cannot be! I have sworn to marry him. I am bound by my solemn word! You must never think of me in this light again, after to-night.'

'And so you cast me off!' says Clifford.

'No—no! I will be your friend, if you will let me, to my life's end; but I cannot be your wife.'

'I will not have you as a friend! you must be my love, or we will be nothing at all to each other,' he answers, passionately.

'Then we must be *nothing at all*,' echoes the low voice of the weeping girl.

He strides from the room, and opens the front door, but returns before he has crossed the threshold.

'Betha! Have you made up your mind? Are you determined to stick to this man Frere?'

'I *must!* I cannot break my plighted word, Geoffrey! You would not have me dishonourable! Pity me, but don't reproach me!'

'Remember,' he says, 'that to-morrow may be too late to change your mind. No one knows what may happen before to-morrow.'

'You will not harm yourself,' she cries, all her tenderness made evident by her voice.

'Heaven knows what I may do! There is but one question I wish answered. Will you break with Mr. Frere for my sake?'

'I cannot break with him,' she says, weeping.

'Will you love me then, and let me love you, whether you break with him or not?'

'Oh no—no! I cannot deceive him. That would be worse than all.'

'Good-bye, then!' says Clifford, shortly, as he passes through the hall and slams the front door after him.

Betha sits where he has left her, stupefied, half-paralysed, by what has passed between them. She feels the difficulties of her position keenly. She is bound in honour to Robert Frere, and Geoffrey Clifford loves her!

The first thought brings a hopeless, melancholy feeling in its train; but the glory of the second almost eclipses it.

What obstacles can love not surmount? and Geoffrey Clifford loves her! Something may happen to prevent her marriage

with Robert Frere—that miraculous 'something,' in which the young and hopeful have so much faith, until they discover it is a will-o'-the-wisp of their imagination, and never turns up anywhere else. Rob may die (pleasant for poor Rob!), or get tired of waiting for her (oh, how she wishes that he would!), and marry some one else; and then all will be sunshine for herself and Geoffrey Clifford: or, even supposing she is compelled to marry Rob, the other—the ideal lover, as purely imaginary as the 'something'—will be faithful to her until the first engagement is dissolved by death, and she is free to marry again. And meanwhile, she will love him, and trust him, above all creatures upon earth.

And though Betha falls to sleep that night with tears upon her cheek, they are not sufficient to prevent her having a happy dream of the moment when she shall meet

Clifford again, and hear him say that he will accept her friendship as this world's best good, until she is able to give him something more.

CHAPTER XIII.

'YOU WILL RETURN TO BARON'S COURT.'

THE waking is not so pleasant as the falling to sleep may have been. The dim morning's light brings misery and depression in its train; the excitement of the previous evening has faded, and with it all the glorious probabilities that arose to soften the first shock to a sensitive girl's heart of learning that she loves in vain. When Betha Durant opens her eyes on that dull November morning, which obliges her to dress by gas-light, the miraculous 'something' has taken wings to itself and flown away, and nothing remains but the heavy consciousness that she is en-

gaged to be married to Bobby Frere, and can never release herself without dishonour. So she goes downstairs in the dullest of moods, and stares at her breakfast instead of eating it, and is rendered still more miserable by a letter from her *fiancé*, in which he reminds her that it is Saturday, and he shall call as usual at two o'clock, to take her for a walk in the Park.

'Mr. Robert Frere, son of Sir Willoughby Frere, of Baron's Court, in the county of Somerset, and clerk in the firm of Messrs. MacKinnon of Leadenhall Street, on a hundred and twenty pounds a year, calls on Saturdays at two o'clock, in consequence of the early-closing movement, to take out Miss Durant, daughter of Major Durant, of Morristown, and actress at the Marlborough Theatre on two pounds a week, for a walk in the Park.'

Thus the silly girl goes on repeating the circumstances of Bobby's life and her own,

and making them out as lowering and ludicrous to both as she possibly can, until from laughing she passes to crying, and winds up with something very like an hysterical attack.

'So comical!' she keeps on saying, with a curled but quivering lip; 'so absurdly comical, to think of a clerk out of the city calling to take me for a walk on Saturday afternoons. It's just like a housemaid going out for a holiday with the young man she keeps company with. I shall feel I am a housemaid next, or something of the sort, and Rob is—is—a grocer's boy! I wonder if he wears an apron in the office—or how he'd look with a basket of eggs on his arm!'

And here the stupid hysterical creature indulges in such a mad outburst of mingled mirth and misery that she frightens Mrs. Henderson into the notion that she is ill, and very nearly gets ordered back to bed for her

pains. So it comes to pass that an unusually pale, dispirited, and silent young lady presents herself as the companion of Mr. Frere during that afternoon's walk, and as soon as they have reached the shelter of the Park, her companion calls her to account for the change.

'Change! what change?' exclaims Betha.

'The change in your manner, dear,' replies Rob, affectionately; 'what has caused it? You are usually so bright, and have so much to tell me of the week's doings. Are you not feeling well to-day, Betha?'

'Perfectly! But as a rule, my dear Rob, you don't care to hear about the theatre! It's so vulgar and low, you know! and my profession is altogether so degrading. I do not suppose anything that happens to me there would interest you!'

Rob looks down from his superior height and regards her from between his half-closed eyes with a look of mingled curiosity and pain.

'It is true that I do not care for your being an actress, Betha, and that I look forward to no day so much as to that when I shall be able to take you off the stage. But it does not follow that I need lose my interest in what happens to you whilst there. On the contrary, my heart is always filled with anxiety on your account.'

'I am sure it need not be!' replies Betha, consciously; 'I am quite able to take care of myself, Rob! besides, what's the good of it? Suppose I were to go worrying all day as to what *you* were doing in Leadenhall Street! why, I might wear myself to skin and bone for nothing.'

Rob laughs.

'Oh! that is quite a different thing, darling. *I* am sitting from nine to six on a three-legged stool, with a ledger before me, and a pen in my hand, and speaking to no one but my fellow-clerks. You need have no fears for me! No harm can happen to me there!'

'Unless you go out of your mind from the monotony! Rob!' says Betha, suddenly, 'isn't it odious work—don't you hate it from the very bottom of your soul?'

The young man colours violently and looks distressed.

'Oh, Betha, don't mention it! I do indeed. It is more horrible to me than I can tell you! Fancy—*me*—who considered it a nuisance even to write a letter—being shut up in a dingy office from one day's end to another, making entries and copying correspondence. It is the most infernal—I beg your pardon, Betha, I hardly know what I am saying—I mean it is the most detestable occupation to which a man can be put.'

'Oh, Rob! why do you submit to it?' cries the girl.

Her question recalls him to himself. The flush subsides, and there is only a slight tremble in his voice as he replies:

'I submit for *your* sake, Betha! you know

the reason for which I applied for work, and that reason will keep me to it as long as it is necessary.'

'But will it be of any good, Rob?' she asks timidly.

'What do you mean? explain yourself!'

'Shall we ever be rich enough to marry? You know it will be such a long, long while first, and so many things may happen, and you are wasting so much time.'

'I cannot call it "wasting" time if it brings me nearer to you, Betha!'

'But think of what you are losing, Rob! I am sure Sir Willoughby and your grandmamma must be very angry with you for leaving Baron's Court to be a common clerk in London—and you have no horses, nor dogs, nor shooting—and I don't believe it agrees with you either, for you are looking very pale—and it makes me feel so guilty, keeping you out of all these things and away from your own people—and just for the sake of me.'

'Betha, when my father and grandmother refused to sanction my engagement to you, I told them I should get work to do by which I would gain money and make myself independent of their approval, and they offered no resistance to my wishes. Perhaps they thought I should get tired of working; but they were mistaken. I shall never get tired of it, however distasteful it may be, whilst it points to the chance of our marriage. I could not have a fairer goal, could I, dearest?' says Rob, as he presses her hand closer to his side.

But Betha always avoids, if possible, any demonstration of affection on her lover's part.

'But don't you miss those things, Rob?' she inquires quickly; 'the horses and carriages, and the good dinners, and all the other luxuries you were accustomed to at Baron's Court?'

'Yes, I miss them, I cannot deny that;

but they are nothing to me compared to the pleasure of being near you, Betha, and knowing that some day we shall be man and wife!'

'Oh, but that is what I cannot bear to think of!' cries the girl. 'That you should go without them, I mean, for my sake—and when it may come to nothing after all.'

'How can it "come to nothing after all"?' repeats the young man, turning very white, as he listens to her words.

'Why, so many things may happen to prevent it. I might die, you know, or have to leave London, or we might never have enough money to marry on—it costs a lot to live comfortably when you're married, you know, Rob—a thousand a year at least; and then you will have wasted all your time in work which you hate for nothing.'

Rob is silent; he is pacing by her side with his eyes on the ground, as if he were

looking for something—perhaps it is the meaning of her words.

'And then it isn't nice work that you've got—for *anybody*,' goes on Betha in a resolute voice; 'very few clerks are gentlemen, and people must stare when they hear who you are. What must they think of it? Sir Willoughby Frere's son in a counting-house, with a pen behind his ear! You had almost as well be a grocer's apprentice! I don't see much difference between the two.'

'Are you *ashamed* of me, Betha?' demands young Frere, in a low voice, which somehow makes her feel ashamed of herself.

'How disagreeable of you, Rob, to ask me such a question! Why should I be ashamed of you, when I am only an actress myself? But I *do* feel that you are placed in a false position, and though I know you did it for my sake, and it's awfully good of you and all that—yet—yet——'

'Yet you liked me better when I was living at Baron's Court, the prospective heir to everything around me.'

'I didn't like you better, but I am sure it is the proper place for you to be in, particularly as——'

'Particularly as *what?* You had better speak out plainly to me, dear. I think I can guess what you mean, but I should like to hear your true mind upon this subject.'

'When you speak in that tone of voice, Rob, I don't like to tell it you; but, now, say the truth—do you think it is likely we shall *ever* be married?'

'I will marry you to-morrow, Betha, if you will consent to it.'

'But that is nonsense! You know what I mean. Can we ever, at this rate, make money enough to marry upon — eight hundred or a thousand a year, you know; and is it any use our going on hoping and

hoping, when in the end we shall find it has all come to nothing? Do think of it seriously, Rob; and of your giving up all the comforts of your home, and making your people angry with you into the bargain, and tell me if you think it is of any use?'

She glances up in his face, rather shyly, as she concludes, and is shocked to see the look of pain which her words have called up on it.

There is a pause between them—a pause during which Robert Frere seems to be trying to steady his voice, and then he answers her in a very low and gentle, but a very determined tone.

'Betha, you have always told me the truth. Tell me the truth now. *Do you want to break off your engagement with me?*'

This direct question appeals to the girl's honour. She cannot lie, and she cannot be cruel, so she stammers and is silent.

'I see it is difficult for you to speak out,

and that only confirms my opinion of your wishes. But I must hear them from your own mouth. Betha, however painful it may be to you, for *my* sake be candid, and let me know the worst.'

'Would not the worst be,' she says trembling, 'for me to marry you and not love you, Rob?'

'Yes, yes, assuredly the worst. See! I will make it easier for you, dear! I will help you over the difficulty. You were kind to me at Baron's Court because you were foolish enough to think you owed me something in return for having pulled you out of the water, and so you consented to our engagement; but when you came to London and—and—saw others, you felt you had made a mistake—a mistake for both of us, remember—and so you think it best to tell me so at once, and set things right—for *both* of us, remember—as far as they can be set right, without delay.'

'Yes, yes, Rob! that is it,' says Betha, eagerly. 'Oh, I am glad you guessed my thoughts, and feel the same upon this subject as I do.'

'And—let me go on, Betha—you wish to cancel our engagement—to break it off, in fact, and let us both be as if it had never been.'

'Yes, yes!' she continues as eagerly; 'and I am sure it *will* be best for both of us, Rob, for me to go on with my profession, and for you to go back to Baron's Court and give up that horrid grubbing in the City. You have done it for my sake, I know, and I thank you for it; but I cannot accept such a sacrifice on your part, and I shall not be happy until I know it is at an end.'

'Very well, dear; so let it be,' he answers quietly; 'and from this day we will be the very best of friends, and nothing more.'

'And you will return to Baron's Court, and make your father and Lady Frere happy

again, and write me long letters to say how much you are enjoying yourself there,' says Betha, with a bright smile, which has yet something fearful in it, as though she were not quite certain if she had done right. But her companion's reply is given so calmly as to set most of her fears at rest.

'I shall always be happy to know that *you* are happy, Betha,' he says; 'and there could not be any happiness for me in the world without it. But now that we have settled this little matter, suppose we talk of something else; or shall we take a hansom and drive out to the country? I may not have many more opportunities of taking you for a drive, Betha.'

'No, not when you are at Baron's Court,' she rejoins cheerfully; 'unless, some day, when I am a very, *very* big swell, Lady Frere and Sir Willoughby relent sufficiently to ask me down there again.'

'With your husband,' suggests young Frere.

Betha blushes scarlet.

'Oh, that's nonsense! I shall never marry—I don't want to; but *you* will have a wife, Rob, by that time, and lots of little children; and I shall be so fond of them all, and so pleased to be their friend—that is, if you will let me.'

The boy (he is no more) does not allow nor deny the probability which she suggests, but turns the subject by hailing a cab and placing her in it. Then they drive out to Hendon, talking gaily all the while, for the rattle of wheels does not favour sentimental conversation; and when they reach home again, Robert Frere hands Betha out, with a bow and a smile, and re-entering the vehicle, directs the driver to his own apartments.

The girl runs up to her bedroom, singing in the lightness of her heart. She feels as if a great load had fallen from her shoulders: as if all the briars had been suddenly removed from her path of life, and the way was clear

and smooth before her. What joy! what happiness! what inexpressible bliss may not be in the future! How shall she ever tell him—*him*, the one *him* in the world for Betha—that she is *free?* Free to love him and worship him to her life's end!

She cannot imagine—she cannot think; her brain is one whirl and her heart one buzz of delight. She can only realise the blessed truth that of his own free will and proposal Robert Frere has released her from her engagement. . . . And meanwhile the boy goes back to his lonely lodgings, pays and dismisses the cabman, walks up to his sitting-room as though he were in a dream, and having locked the door behind him, sinks down into a chair by the table, and hiding his face upon his outstretched arms, bursts into a flood of bitter tears.

CHAPTER XIV.

'WHAT HAS BECOME OF HIM?'

When six o'clock strikes that evening, and Mrs. Henderson's cheery voice is heard warning her that it is time to get ready, Betha Durant feels as if it would be impossible to go to the theatre and encounter the fire of Geoffrey Clifford's glances. They said so much to each other the night before—the secret of both hearts was so thoroughly revealed, she thinks he must read her hope of happiness the first moment her eyes are raised to his, and at that idea she becomes as shy as though she heard her lover calling her to his arms.

It will seem as if *she* were courting *him*, she says to herself, if she tells him of her freedom with her own lips. In her love and anxiety and modesty the girl thinks of a dozen little *ruses* by which Mr. Clifford shall learn the truth, but none are satisfactory to her. She cannot talk of so private a matter before the other ladies of the theatre—she knows the coarseness with which they would regard the communication, and the comments they would make upon it.

She shrinks even from letting good Mrs. Henderson know that her engagement is cancelled and done with. No; Betha decides that the hearing of the momentous news must be left to chance. Perhaps Geoffrey — how sweet it is to call him 'Geoffrey,' though only to herself!—perhaps he will guess it from the light that is dancing in her eyes and the smiles that *will* curve her lips, do what she may to restrain them: anyway, she is going to him: she will look

on his face again and hear his voice, and there is bliss in that thought, even though it makes her tremble.

She hurries into the theatre, hoping, yet fearing, she may encounter him before she reaches her dressing-room. His elegant figure is generally to be seen lounging behind the scenes till the last moment, and he has got into more than one scrape with Mr. Henderson for keeping the stage waiting, on account of his incorrigible laziness in dressing. But on this particular night he is not to be seen, and Betha thinks, with a smile, that, for once, he intends to be punctual.

The play is the 'School for Scandal,' in which she takes the character of 'Lady Teazle,' Clifford that of 'Charles Surface,' and Mr. Henderson 'Sir Oliver.' In this piece it will be remembered that 'Charles Surface' does not appear until the second act, and Betha, once on the stage, forgets everything but the business she is engaged

upon, and goes through her scenes with 'Sir Peter' without a thought of the absent lover.

As she comes off at the end of the first act, however, she finds Mr. Henderson in his dress of 'Sir Oliver,' fuming and stamping behind the scenes.

'Not come! not arrived!' he exclaims, angrily. 'D——n it all! send round to his rooms at once to say the stage is waiting! Send a cab, Tomkins—d'ye hear! and tell 'em to drive like the devil. And you, Martin, go round to Signor Maccavelli and say he must keep up the band for another ten minutes. *Not here!* Confound the fellow! I'll teach him to play me another trick like this!'

'What is it, papa?' says Betha, with sudden alarm, as she pulls him by the sleeve.

'*What is it?* You may well ask, "What is it?" Here we're just going to ring up the

curtain for the second act, and that confounded fool Clifford has not arrived.'

'Not arrived! Impossible!' cries Betha. 'Have they sent to his dressing-room? He *must* be here.'

Mr. Henderson turns and regards her with a look of the supremest contempt.

'You just go to your own room,' he says, 'and don't stand there talking nonsense. I tell you he's not in the theatre. But by the Lord Harry, I'll make him smart for it! He's getting a d——d sight too blown up and conceited, but he needn't think to play any of his airs off upon me. I'll give him his dismissal to-morrow, as sure as my name's Henderson!'

'But what can we do? Suppose he doesn't come!' demands Miss Price, who is enacting the part of 'Maria.'

'*I* will undertake the character,' says Mr. Fellowes, coming forward, 'I've played "Charles Surface" many times before, Mr.

Henderson, and I'll change my dress in ten minutes if some one will take "Master Rowley" off my hands.'

'You're my man!' cries the stage-manager, clapping the speaker on the back. 'Cut up into Clifford's dressing-room, my boy, and get into his duds as quick as you can; and Lawson here shall take the Jew. And I'll be d——d if Clifford shall have the part again, if he comes on the wings of the wind! Now clear the stage, all of you, and hurry as much as you can, whilst I get the other side of the "rag," and make an apology for that cursed fellow's absence.'

Everybody scuttles off at the manager's bidding, laughing, blaming, and wondering, and Betha goes with them, though she of all is silent.

Apart from the consternation she feels at the probable consequences of Geoffrey Clifford's defalcation, a horrible fear oppresses her lest his absence should be caused by sick-

ness or some other misfortune. Else, why should he not have sent word, even at the last moment, that he was unable to appear? It is so unusual—so extraordinary. Nothing, Betha thinks, but sudden death could excuse such a breach of everything that is business-like and gentlemanly.

And while she ponders thus, with a cold, sick fear curdling her blood as she remembers that he warned her last evening that if she would not promise then and there to break her plighted word with Robert Frere, the morrow might prove *too late* to change her mind, the idle talk and conjectures of the ladies who share her dressing-room drive her almost crazy.

'What on earth can have become of him?' cries Fanny Price. 'I never heard of such a thing in my life. Absenting himself without even an apology. Well, if it leads to his dismissal, *I* shan't break my heart, for one! I always thought him an overrated coxcomb,

and if it hadn't been for his good looks he'd never have stood where he does!'

'Henderson said "Let there be a star," and there was a star; and the morning and the evening were the hundred and twenty-fifth day!' exclaims another young lady, rather irreverently.

'Ah, but he'll go down now, my dear, with a vengeance. He'll become a falling star, see if he doesn't,' replies Miss Price. 'And no great loss either. Mr. Fellowes can play all his parts quite as well as he can. And old H. will never look over this. He's a perfect Tartar for punctuality.'

'Why couldn't the fellow have sent to say he was ill—or whatever other lie he chose to concoct for himself?'

'My dear, he's no more ill than you are! More likely drunk! I met him in the Strand this morning, and he looked half-seas-over, then. Depend upon it, he's comfortably tucked up in bed.'

'Well, he'll have plenty of time to enjoy it now, as far as the Marlborough's concerned, *I* bet,' retorts Miss Price, with a side glance to see how Miss Selwyn is taking the downfall of her favourite.

But Betha has not a word—not one single word—to offer in his defence; and if she had, she could not trust her voice to utter it. She changes her rich dress mechanically, and listens in silence to all the cruel things that are said concerning him, whilst her whole frame shivers as if with cold; and a dreadful exaggerated fear is clinging to her heart lest the messenger should return to say that he is dead—shot through the brain, perhaps, with his own pistol, or found stark and stiff upon his bed with an open vial in his hand, driven out of the world by despair and the cruelty which let him go last night without one word of hope or comfort!

'Lor, miss, you're never going on like that!' exclaims the dresser. 'Why, you've

gone as white as a sheet! and you're shaking with the cold! There, let me give you a touch of rouge! There, that's better! You was enough to frighten one before!'

And the girl, when her call comes, creeps down the stairs as mechanically as she ascended them, and goes through her part like an automaton.

Country cousins who visited the Marlborough that night expressly to see the young actress of whom the papers speak so highly, are terribly disappointed in Miss Selwyn's 'Lady Teazle.'

'She's awfully pretty, of course,' they say to their mammas and papas over the breakfast-table the following morning; 'and in the first part she played well enough. But she went off terribly in the last scenes. She seemed as if she was too tired to do anything, and she looked quite plain—didn't she, Bessie?'

And mamma wonders and sympathises,

and says she dares to say the poor thing *was* tired, and it is shocking to think of young people being kept up night after night in that fashion; and she really believes she must put a stop to it, for Bessie and Mary are looking quite pale themselves. Which is followed by a chorus of indignant denials on the part of her daughters, in the course of which poor Betha's shortcomings are suffered to be forgotten.

It is wonderful to her in after-days to think how she *did* drag through her part that evening, with such an awful though undefinable fear knocking at her heart the while. It is over at last, however, and the green curtain is down. Never in all her experience of theatrical life has Betha been so thankful to complete an evening's task. She turns with white lips to Mr. Henderson as they meet at the wings.

'Mr. Clifford not put in an appearance

yet?' she asks him, in a tone which is intended to sound light and indifferent.

'Not he,' grunts the manager; 'and what's more, he never intended to do so. He left his rooms this afternoon, and has not been there since. But I'll make him pay for this, as sure as I live! It's the most scurvy trick that has ever been played upon me!'

'But,' she answers, trembling, 'perhaps something has happened to him. He may be ill—or—or—in want of assistance! Can they do nothing? Can no one go—or—or—send—to see after him?'

The tone of the poor child's voice attracts the manager's attention. He turns and looks at her steadily for a moment, then takes her hand and leads her to his private room, where, producing a bottle and glass, he pours out wine and holds it to her lips.

'Drink that, child!' he says, in his rough way; 'and stop that confounded shaking.

No harm has happened to the fellow, you may take your oath of that! It's the theatre that will suffer, not he. And now go and get your things off, and I'll take you home. Here, drink another glass of sherry before you go. It's no use trying to shirk it. I don't want those chattering fools upstairs to see you in this state, and neither, I suppose, do you. Make as much haste as you can! I shan't be comfortable till I've taken you home to the old woman.'

And having done so, the kind-hearted manager leaves her there, believing, and truly, that if her strength does not prove sufficient for the concealment of her feelings, she will suffer less in betraying them before a woman than himself.

But Betha bears up bravely until the following day. The suspense and anxiety are horrible to bear: they keep her awake all night, staring, with wide-open eyes, into the darkness, whilst she conjectures all sorts of

explanations for the mystery that enshrouds Geoffrey Clifford's disappearance.

But whilst it *is* a mystery, fancy can divert her mind with a dozen reasons for his absence, no one of which casts a shade of dishonour upon the love she knows she bears him. Under any other circumstances, Betha would feel dreadfully ashamed to think that Mr. Henderson had guessed the interest she takes in Clifford; but just now it seems of secondary importance compared to the heavy trouble she must labour under until she hears that he is safe and well, and all the misunderstanding between them is cleared up again. It *must* come right. She repeats this comforting assurance to herself a hundred times that night: nothing serious can really have happened to her beloved Geoffrey! They will see him on the morrow, and he will explain away all that now appears so inexplicable, and he will guess the great secret of her freedom from the very joy she will be

unable to conceal at their reunion; and then the blessed sunshine must break out again, and all will be ineffable happiness.

Yet, though Betha keeps on comforting herself with this belief, and determining to close her eyes and sleep in peace upon it, the sleep will not come, and morning finds her as wide awake and as anxious as before. She rises and descends to breakfast, only to find that Mr. Henderson has already left the house, and she is to be subjected to his wife's conjectures and condemnation of Mr. Clifford's behaviour, until she feels as though she must order her to hold her tongue.

'But there, as I tell papa,' Mrs. Henderson chatters on, 'if he will go and pin all his faith and risk his fortunes on an actor, what can he expect? A nasty, low, shifty lot—that's what I call them! Ah, my dear! I don't mean *you*, of course, because (as I've always told you) you are a great deal too good for the stage; and how you

came to choose such an up-and-down business I can't imagine. But this Clifford, now (or whatever he calls himself), is quite another sort! I always told papa not to build upon him! He has a shifty eye—haven't you remarked it, Betha?—and never looks you straight in the face.'

'He has been tolerably punctual to business hitherto,' says poor Betha, feeling she must put in a good word for her hero; 'and never stayed away from the theatre at night before.'

'Ah, my dear, but he's one of your swells (if papa says true)—a gentleman with money of his own—and they're never to be depended on from one day to another. However, papa's gone round to his rooms now to make inquiries after him, and perhaps we shall hear something when he returns. But lor, Betha, you don't look at all well yourself this morning—or is it this nasty fog makes you so yellow?'

'I don't feel ill,' says Betha, with a ghastly smile, as she rises from her chair; 'but I think I am rather tired with my week's work, and will lie down for an hour or two till papa comes home again.'

'And won't you go to church?' demands Mrs. Henderson, who is always scandalised at the idea of anyone neglecting that duty.

'I *can't* go to church this morning,' replies the girl, wearily; 'I should go to sleep before the service was half over!'

If she had said she should go into hysterics before the service was half over, it would have been a truer excuse, for she has difficulty in keeping down her tendency to violent emotion even when she is left to the calming influence of solitude.

CHAPTER XV.

'AVENGED TENFOLD.'

But though Betha shuts herself up in her room and locks the door, she does not lie down on her bed, as Mrs. Henderson fondly imagines.

In her present state of mind, solitude is indispensable to her, but inertion would be maddening. So she wanders backward and forward in the small apartment, mechanically overhauling her stock of clothing—arranging a drawer of ribbons and laces here, or smoothing the folds of a crushed dress there, whilst her thoughts are far, far away, and she hardly realises whether she is in this world or out of it.

Women have the faculty of occupying their hands quite apart from their brains, and of going through a great deal of manual labour without giving a single thought to what they are doing.

In the course of her enforced employment, Betha turns out her little writing-desk, and gazes through her unshed tears at various letters which she has hoarded there. There are several from Mattie Levison which she thinks she had better destroy, and yet has not the heart to do so. True, her intimacy in that quarter seems at an end, and coming events are not likely to renew it—yet Betha has always loved Mattie, notwithstanding the cruel things she said last time they met. She cannot forget the girl's sweetness of disposition and readiness to oblige when they were school-fellows at Princess College together, and if of late circumstances have somewhat roused her temper, and made her unkind, Betha cannot determine that she

will never forgive her. She thinks of the languid, lovely girl, with her want of principle and her unhappy home, and hardly wonders, though she cannot but blame, the infatuation which made her resent the possibility of losing such a friend as Geoffrey Clifford.

Poor dear Mattie! she has been very imprudent and very unjust, but her generous schoolmate has a soft spot still in her heart for all her short-comings, and puts away the little packet of letters in a secret drawer to remind her of the friendship that once was. But she feels no such compunction at parting with one or two notes that she has preserved of Robert Frere's. They are manly, honest little effusions: not very gushing, though affectionate and straightforward, but their presence in Betha's desk is an insult to *the other man,* and it is her womanly nature that prompts her to tear them into shreds and throw them away. Yet she does it with a sigh.

'Poor Rob,' she thinks; 'what a pity it is that I ever met him! But he will go back to Baron's Court now, and live with his father as he ought to do, and perhaps he will be none the worse for this little experience. Poor old Rob! He is very good and kind, and thoroughly true; but it is much better as it is. We never should have got on together, and I dare say by this time he is as glad to be out of it as I am.'

There is a long epistle there from Kate Montalambert, full of dashes, and the most ardent expressions of affection, and all the latest news of the Buton Theatre.

Betha puts it on one side with a faint smile. She must answer it shortly, or Kate will wonder what has become of her. It will never do to requite her friend's gushing attachment by showing a want of interest in her dress for the coming pantomime, or forgetting to inquire after the gentleman who

caught an ague from hanging about the stage-door at night to kiss the hem of her ulster as she passed the threshold.

Then there is a business letter from a New York manager, offering her high terms to cross the Atlantic, and take the 'lead' at his theatre for six months. When Betha received that letter, her first feeling was one of utter abhorrence at the mere idea of leaving England, and all the interest it holds for her. To cross the sea alone: to make her home amongst strangers: to act with men and women she had never seen before: she felt as if she would rather return to Buton, and take up her residence again with Kate Montalambert.

But now she sits looking at that letter for the best part of an hour, whilst she wonders idly what sort of a city New York must be; and if the Yankees would welcome her kindly, and make much of her, as they do at home; or if they would ridicule her efforts

to please them, and declare her abilities to have been over-rated.

She is still employing herself in this aimless manner, as she turns the New York manager's communication over and over in her hands, when she is roused from her reverie by hearing the latch-key grate in the front door.

Mr. Henderson has returned, then; now she shall hear something. Betha starts from her sitting position with crimson cheeks, and listens eagerly for any sound that may reach her from below. There is a great commotion of voices: at first she believes there must be more than the master and mistress of the house talking together; and a sudden hope that Geoffrey Clifford may have come back with the manager flickers up for a moment to make her heart beat almost to suffocation. But in the next it has died away again. She cannot distinguish his voice, and she should know it amongst a

thousand. The minutes are hours until she hears a footstep on the stairs, and when it comes, she flings open her door without ceremony, and meets Mrs. Henderson upon the threshold.

'What news?' she cries, impatiently. The dread of betraying herself has vanished beneath her awful anxiety to learn the truth.

'Oh, my dear—my dear! the very worst of news,' says Mrs. Henderson, in a wailing voice. 'It's all over, Betha, and the most shameful thing that I ever heard of.'

But before she has time to say more, the girl has pulled her inside the bedroom door, and shut it upon them both. She believes she is about to receive her death-blow, and the less spectators there are to her anguish, the better she will be able to bear it.

'Tell me all, at once,' she utters, with parched lips that can scarcely articulate the words.

'Lor, my dear child! you needn't pull a

body about in that way,' says Mrs. Henderson, settling her ruffled plumes. 'I should have told you soon enough, never fear. I only came upstairs for the purpose, and quite glad to get out of papa's way too, for he's in such a rage about it as you never saw.'

'About *what?* How can I understand if you won't tell me? Is—is—he *dead?*'

'*Dead!* what, that fellow Clifford! I should think not, my dear! It would be a very good thing if he were dead; but those sort of men never die, more's the pity!'

Betha sits down upon the bed with a deep sigh of relief. He is not dead, thank heaven! Everything—she thinks—will be easy to bear after that.

'What is it all about, then?' she asks, in a low voice. 'Why was he absent from the theatre?'

'Ah! that's the villainy of it, my dear. I've got something to tell you that will make you open your eyes; but I don't know

what's come to men and women nowadays. They seem all bad alike. Papa went round to that Clifford's chambers, in the Albany, and who should he meet there but your friend Mr. Levison, and then it all came out.'

'Mr. Levison! But what had he to do in the Albany?' gasps Betha.

'Why! he had gone there in search of Clifford, of course, just the same as papa—and he vows, that when he catches him he'll kill him; and I shouldn't wonder if he did either, and serve him right, *I* say.'

'But Mrs. Henderson, I really don't understand what Mr. Levison can have to do with the matter,' says the girl, in a piteous voice.

'My dear, you *are* dull. Why, Clifford's run away with his wife; *that's* what he's got to do with it.'

The colour fades from Betha's face, leaving her as grey as ashes.

'It's not true!' she exclaims, with trembling lips, as she stands by the bedside, steadying herself with one hand. 'I don't believe it.'

'What nonsense, Betha! I tell you it *is* true. Mrs. Levison left a letter for her husband, telling him all about it, and he showed it to papa this evening. They went off to Paris, together, by the boat yesterday afternoon, which of course accounts for Clifford being absent last evening. And this comes of engaging a gentleman with independent means! I always told papa it would come to no good. They just serve you as long as it suits their convenience, and if anything else comes in their way off they go. And to run away with another man's wife, too! As if there weren't women and to spare in this world, without playing such a dirty trick as that! But I never liked that Clifford, Betha. I've no opinion of actors as a lot, and he's too well-looking to be any

good. Handsome men are generally wicked. The women take care they shall be. And as for Mrs. Levison, she ought to be shot—in fact, they ought both to be shot; and they would be too, if I had my way.'

'Mrs. Henderson,' says a faint voice from the bedside, 'would you be so kind as to open the window for me?'

'Open the window! lor, my dear! and on such a foggy morning. But you do look a little faint. This business has upset you, I dare say, as it has us all; but don't you be troubling yourself as to who will take his place. Papa will look after that, you may be sure, and there's as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it. And if that Clifford ever thinks to come back to the Marlborough, why he'll find himself very much mistaken. Papa's so angry about the whole business, that I believe he'd shut up the theatre sooner than engage him again. But come now, Betha, won't you lie down a bit before dinner and

try to recover yourself? We've got the most beautiful leg of roast pork, and an apple tart, and I shall be so vexed if I don't see you able to enjoy it with us! I'll explain to papa that this business has worried you a bit, and he won't expect to see you till dinner is on the table.'

'No! no!' exclaims the girl, struggling to recover herself, whilst the light of a true heroism beams in her eyes; 'I do not wish to lie down, Mrs. Henderson. I am quite able to go downstairs with you and hear all that papa has to say upon this unfortunate affair.'

And she plunges into the little sitting-room with the same desperate resolution that would have carried her to the stake.

What 'papa' has to say is soon said.

'D——n the rascal!' he exclaims energetically, 'I would like to brand his pretty face across with a hot iron! And that sniggling wriggling fine lady friend of yours too, Betha! She must be a nice sort of person!

I never liked her, for all her beauty. She looks too conscious of it, and she dresses too smartly. I have nothing to say against her philanderings of course—if her husband approved of them, no one else had a right to interfere—but she ought to be ashamed of herself for carrying off an actor like Clifford in the middle of his engagement. I'd like to see both well whipped.'

'I don't think Mattie can be the one to blame,' says Betha, and it is the only remark she makes on the occasion; 'because she was always gentle and so timid, and so easily led!'

'Pshaw, my dear! the women are *always* to blame in these cases. We men have got nothing to do but to follow their lead. But you must get out of the way of calling that person "Mattie," or of thinking that you'll ever see her again. You're under my charge, remember, and I won't have you corrupted by any such evil example.'

'Oh no! oh no!' says Betha, shrinking from the very idea, as if she had been asked to take a serpent to her bosom.

And at this juncture the roast pork makes its appearance, and in the bustle and interest of vulgar every-day necessities, her bleeding heart is suffered to float down the stream of life unnoticed.

* * * * *

But that evening when Mrs. Henderson's night-capped head reposes peacefully on its pillow, the door of the parlour where the manager is still sitting, busied with letters and accounts, is quietly pushed open, and a pale face and slight figure come into view.

'Why, my dear!' he exclaims, 'how is this—not yet in bed? I thought you went upstairs an hour ago.'

'Yes, papa; but I wanted to consult you about this,' and Betha holds out the

American manager's letter in her trembling hand.

Mr. Henderson has seen it before, and he guesses at once the reason why it is again presented for his consideration.

'Ah!' he says, 'Parkyn's offer of a New York engagement! But I thought you had decided not to close with him for this year, at all events, Betha.'

'I know I did; but—but—I have been thinking it over again, papa, and if you will let me go—I would like—I would rather—I think it will be best for me——'

But here the girl's voice falters, and she is unable to proceed. The manager looks at her downcast face and drooping form with the utmost compassion.

'Poor child—poor child!' he says; 'are you so hard hit as that?'

The kindly words, which show he has guessed her secret, break down the barriers of Betha's womanly reserve.

'Oh, papa!' she gasps. 'Don't ask me any questions, but let me go! I feel as if the air of England would stifle me.'

'I will see about it,' he says, shortly; then, after a pause: 'If I didn't love you like my own child, my dear, I should decidedly say "No," for I think you ought to be for another year, at least, in London before you cross the duck-pond; but, under the circumstances—Well, Betha! you'll trust me to do the best I can for you, won't you? but it'll go hard with us to lose you, and I wish that d——d rascal had been shot before I ever let him cross the threshold of the Marlborough.'

She makes no answer to this tirade, but creeps back to her bedroom silently, and locks the door behind her, and gives vent to the grief that bids fair to kill all that is fairest in her young life.

There let us leave her, in company only with her bitter disappointment and her tears.

It would be idle as useless to intrude upon her sorrow; but if Robert Frere requires a Nemesis for the thorn she planted in his heart but yesterday, he has but to follow her into her solitude, to realise that his sufferings are avenged tenfold.

END OF VOL. II.

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